

Framing the Complexity of a Participatory Democracy in a Public Primary Classroom

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Abstract: Democracy in a primary classroom is explored. The popular notion of democracy as a mechanical decision making tool is replaced by the idea of ongoing active participation of all community members in the development of that community. Patterns of interaction are the focus rather than resolutions.

A description of events from an Action Research project illustrate how Complexity Theory can be used to understand a participatory democratic community as an adaptive system. I recount the nature of class meetings, class generated problem solving strategies, and a project based approach. Complexity Theory also influences the methodology of the research itself.

“Framing” is a strategy for understanding the tensions between autonomy and responsibility, individual and public curricula, and chaos and order.

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The Significance of Responsibility and Autonomy in the Primary Classroom

Many educational documents call for the development of responsibility and autonomy in students. British Columbia's recent Integrated Resource Packages state as one of three principles of learning that "Learning is both an individual and a group process" (Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, 1996, p.1). The mandate of the Ministry of Education designates a goal for human and social development: "...to develop a sense of social responsibility, and a tolerance and respect for the ideas and beliefs of others" (p.1). At the local level, the Richmond School District (1997) wishes to enable its students "...to enjoy a productive and satisfying life and to be positive, responsible participants in our democratic society and the global community." L'École Bilingue Elementary School (1996) in Vancouver describes among its values "...tolerance and respect for others; individuality, worth and the needs of the individual; collaboration, co-operation and common goals...." Socially oriented values such as social responsibility, tolerance, respect, democracy, and individuality are promoted in most curriculum plans of government, school boards and schools. There is widespread agreement as to the value of these concepts but there is little consensus as to what they mean in school practice. While there is agreement that the purpose of school is to cultivate responsible citizens who contribute effectively to society, the most prevalent social structure in schools is one that is imposed on students by teachers, administrators, and the physical setting. The purpose of this structure is efficient management of large numbers of students for academic learning. The social context of learning becomes incidental, secondary to more easily measured learning outcomes. On one hand, socially oriented values are promoted, while on the other, concerns regarding the system itself overwhelm the practice. This tension between the social and the technical provides a challenge for teachers

concerned with providing the best opportunities for the cultivation of responsible democratic citizens.

The popular conception of democracy tends to focus on the technical aspects, such as voting, representation, and government bureaucracy, which seems to breed apathy and cynicism. This paper instead advocates a participatory democracy which focuses on the unpredictable, changing human aspects of democracy. A participatory democracy, in addition to decision making and resolution, addresses the process of active inclusion of all members in the ongoing development of the community.

The value of this research lies in its effort to bridge the gap between the learning ideals of a social learning community and the authoritative effects of the hierarchical public education system. The following discussion explores possibilities for autonomous student learning within the constraints of social responsibility. An outcome of this study is that teachers may be able to maximize student participation in decisions about learning; they may provide direct experience in learning how to live democratically; and they may allow students more ownership of their learning due to their perception of relevance within a meaningful learning community.

Complexity Theory

In a participatory democracy, students simultaneously have individual autonomy and responsibility to the community. These often competing concepts can be unified when existing in a caring, respectful environment where there is a strong desire on the part of individuals to develop and strengthen their own community. This social classroom focus promotes learning in an active, practical, and relevant context. The community is in a continual state of renewal as its members grow within its influence, but also influence the community's growth.

However, this is a somewhat vague model that features continual change, lacks clear solutions, requires more than simple products for evaluation, and, comparatively, devalues closure. Indeed, it is contradictory to the prevalent reductionist approach to public education where school life has been simplified into isolated subjects, a prescriptive curriculum, and standards of behavior and assessment. A participatory democracy admittedly seems more difficult to implement. It requires constant adjustment to new events, tolerance for a multiplicity of ideas and opinions, and patience with the uncertainty of correct procedures for all eventualities. It is much easier and efficient for a teacher to exercise absolute authority.

But for those teachers who suspect that the long term benefits for students living and directly experiencing democracy outweigh the short term benefits of rigid order, a philosophy that allows some stability without authoritarianism, and some freedom without the fear of chaos, would indeed be helpful. Thankfully, most classrooms, however teacher directed, are not strictly authoritarian. Most teachers understand the value of student ownership and intrinsic motivation in learning. Most classrooms acknowledge uncertainty and unpredictability in the learning process. It seems that successful teaching necessitates an appreciation of complexity. I argue that a participatory democratic classroom, that embraces both autonomy and responsibility, must learn the lessons of complexity, since it lies on the edge between chaos and order.

It is a complex world. Specialists from many disciplines are discovering that segregating their subject areas has had limited success in promoting thorough understanding (e.g. Waldrop, 1992). They are beginning to recognize the need to integrate disciplines and look upon understanding of the world and life from a holistic point of view. In their efforts to integrate their disciplines, these specialists are discovering many common conceptions in understanding complex phenomena.

Since educational structures are complex, Complexity Theory is useful for understanding and creating democratic classrooms. Fritjof Capra (1983, 1996, 2002) wrote ground breaking books on the subject of complexity and the nature of life. I have collected seven of the major terms from Capra's general overview of complexity theory from *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture* to frame a discussion of complexity as applied to the participatory democratic classroom.

Disequilibrium

The simple act of walking requires us to be off balance to move forward. In our classrooms, we do not ever want our students to complete their learning. It is a continuing "walk", marked by celebrations and milestones, but always in disequilibrium so that learning and development progress. Students are constantly adapting to changes in their setting which, in turn, promote new changes. As such, learning is enacted in a fluid, often turbulent, social setting. Multiple and constant interactions continually reshape that body of learning. It is this activity, this enacting of shared experiences and knowledge that constitute creative learning. There are products, markers, successes, and various measures and accounting of knowledge and achievements, but these are parts of the continuous evolution of learning rather than endings.

Order and Chaos

Adaptive systems, such as a classroom, are said to exist at the edge of chaos, neither dissolving into disorder nor found in static balance. One can see in disequilibrium the tensions among extremes that, unconstrained by each other, would break these adaptive systems apart, resulting in chaos. On the other hand, too much rigid constraint would destroy the dynamic aspects that allow for growth and evolution. This would result in stagnant order. If a participatory democratic classroom is seen as being at the edge of chaos, then neither autonomy

nor responsibility dominate. Rather there is constant interplay between the two. Students are developing their independence and skills at making reasonable decisions but autonomy cannot dominate. Clearly, if every student made self centered choices, the community would descend into chaos. Students are also developing their sense of community and care for the common interests of the group but a sense of extrinsic responsibility cannot dominate either. If the will of the community, manifested in stifling majority or authoritarian rule, is imposed in standardized ways, ownership, creativity, and the “life” of the community is lost. That inflexible order denies the unique and varied contributions of individuals. The edge of chaos is in disequilibrium but it is stable.

Self-Organization

In a democratic setting, we are interested in the interplay of autonomy and responsibility that is not in balance, not static, but evolving. In simple terms, students discover that responsibility allows more autonomy, which when exercised in a community oriented setting requires more responsibility. This self-organizing process continues in much the same way as a complex organic life form does, evolving in unpredictable ways, adapting, and continuing to make creative interactions with its environment. The cycle repeats and re-organizes, hence the turbulence.

Self-organizing complex structures are in disequilibrium. Their stability comes not from the juxtaposition of their parts as in machinery, but rather, in the quality of links among the parts. Relationships are the important factors as opposed to individuals. Patterns and rhythms define the structures. In the classroom, it is the patterns of interaction that define it and make it unique. In a democratic classroom, interactions are enhanced. Individuals have the potential to influence

the structure of the class, just as the good of the class guides individual choice. A democratic classroom is, at least to some degree, a self-organizing classroom.

Ecology

Davis, Sumara, and Kieren (1996) describe how learning is enacted. It is not separate from the environment or from others. It is not necessarily expressed in formal ways and may be tacit rather than formalized. "...an understanding of the self is not abstracted from the world which contains it but, rather, is the world. Knowing, being, and doing are not three things. They are one" (p. 154). Students in a participatory democracy learn not just about democracy but, rather, enact democracy. The knowing cannot be separated from the doing or just being immersed in the actions of democracy. They are all aspects of the same thing. Like Davis's eight year old math students engaged in an open ended search for understanding of fractions in which they create their own personalized conceptions, "These students [are] participating in the creating or unfolding of the world, while at the same time effecting their own structures. In a phrase, they and their world [are] co-emerging" (p. 155).

Relationships and interactions mediate the ecology of the classroom. What affects a single member affects the entire class. There is also a symbiotic exchange between the whole classroom and its environment. That environment includes the physical structure of the school, the administration, the character of the school community, parental involvement, and the influence of the community at large. Individual students are interdependent with their classmates while all are interdependent with their environment.

Evolution

Capra (1983) claims that systems theory (complexity theory) can make it possible to understand "biological, social, cultural, and cosmic evolution in terms of the same pattern of

systems dynamics, even though the different kinds of evolution involve very different mechanisms” (p. 286). If this claim is true then complexity theory is a suitable metaphor for the classroom as a cultural entity. Evolution expresses itself in learning and development. It is creative and adaptive but it exists in a stable state that is far from equilibrium. It fluctuates, flows, and is always ready to transform itself, that is to evolve. But the environment in which the classroom exists is also a living dynamic system. We can not merely regard the evolution of the classroom or the individual in isolation as would a Darwinian metaphor of evolution. Rather, the classroom plus its environment co-evolve in a connected, continually changing process. The kind of classroom that is well suited to recognize this kind of complexity is one that embraces creativity and adaptation. It exists at the edge of chaos and order, and values both autonomy and a responsible regard for the whole.

Emergent Properties

A fascinating aspect of these self-organizing, adaptive systems is the concept of emergent properties. The whole has characteristics or abilities that are not present in any of its individual parts. For example, individual notes contain no music but when combined with others in a timed sequence, then harmony, melody, and emotional expression are possible. There are infinite possibilities for emergent properties in a classroom community which would reflect the kinds of interactions that take place within the group. One would expect that a participatory democratic classroom would develop an overarching enactment of respect, inclusion, tolerance, and critical thinking.

Shared Consciousness

The mind is not contained in the brain but, rather, includes the entire body. It is the pattern of organization or the set of dynamic relationships that results in awareness. But Capra

(2002) extends the concept of mind beyond the human individual by noting that collectives of human minds are embedded ecologically in social systems.

So in a social entity such as a classroom, shared consciousness is comprised of those common values that define a community. Shared consciousness is the community culture which continually evolves through coordinated behavior, most commonly, language. To participate in the discourse of a classroom is to share in the construction of its consciousness or culture. If diversity and autonomy are valued within the desire to construct a community with responsible regard for all its members, then inclusion of all community members in the classroom discourse must be facilitated.

Methodology

I undertook research to explore and describe the development of a participatory democratic primary classroom. The method chosen was Action Research in which the collaboration was to be maximized among all of the participants, including the students themselves.

In keeping with the spirit of complexity theory and an ecological approach to social systems, I developed an ideal model of participatory collaborative action research that addressed issues of organic collaboration, authentic participation, power differential, language, and ethics.

Organic Collaboration

The organic collaboration identifies issues that are jointly owned. Each party can independently provide parts of the solution to a goal. One party by itself is unable to achieve the goal. It is this ecology of collaboration which is necessary for effective action research. It is termed “boundary-spanning” since both parties have a vested interest in the outcome and require each other’s assistance to achieve their goals. It seems that most topics of research in the

classroom impact on students and therefore would be of interest to them, even if that interest is for self-defense. The discovery of boundary-spanning issues is dependent on finding a common language and in facilitating participation. Regardless of the choice of research topic, in an organic collaboration, all partners achieve a consensus on choosing a topic that is both of personal interest and of mutual benefit (Whitford, Schlechty, and Shelor, 1987). The issue chosen for research that includes students need not be of general school reform or classroom wide restructuring (Chisholm, 1992). Rather, important issues of limited scope and high familiarity may be an acceptable place to start. Eventually, these limited research endeavors could become very significant and sophisticated. McTaggart (1991) recommends that research start small to allow a basis for collaboration to evolve.

Authentic Participation

McTaggart also states that participation is problematic in research situations where people have different power, status, influence, and language facility. Each of these concerns presents a challenge to the authentic participation of students. As previously claimed, there are no global standards that can be applied as a solution to specific cases. Rather, a collaborative research team must address these concerns on an ongoing and specific basis. If we recognize the presence of disequilibrium in the classroom, it is essential that students have an active role and an equal voice in this continuing discourse so that self-organization takes place. I suggest, for example, that the use of class meetings that share governance could serve as the forum in which these issues are pursued, along with reflection and planning for the research content.

Power Differential

The issue of power is indeed problematic in proposing a partnership in research with students, particularly young children. On one hand, there seems to be a logical and ethical

argument for the inclusion of students, but on the other hand there are enormous methodological barriers due to the status of children in western society. Lynne Chisholm (1992) talks about the wide endorsement of symmetrical, or democratic, relations in research, especially for action research. However, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to symmetry and research with young people (p. 254). Although, I do not anticipate a classroom revolution where students dominate the teacher and control without reason, there is an opportunity in action research for students to assume some negotiated autonomy with regard to their own learning in the current research. There is also the potential for students to acquire an intimate knowledge of social activism and experience the possibilities for social change. This is a chance for students to learn about both self-organization and leadership. As always, in action research, the focus is not only on an end product but is also on the process and the discovery of new questions. If this proposed research community is committed to the continuing process of renewing participation, addressing power differentials, and developing discourse, then the focus of this research is as much on the power arrangements as on the subject of research.

Language

As McTaggart (1991) states, language and discourse are a central aspect of the culture of a group (p. 173). In the case of university and school based researchers, each group brings with it unique patterns of language that are formed within the group to enhance communication, thereby creating the culture (and shared consciousness) of the group as well as individual identities. But when two unique cultures come together, language can be an obstacle between the two groups.

Teachers and children generally participate in language development as a normal course of events. Collaborating in research, with an emphasis on discourse, will accentuate the challenge and the enjoyment of this process. Of particular interest is the language of reporting.

Rather than relying on university journals as the primary source of publishing results, teachers may wish to publish papers for their peers and to provide workshop presentations. Students can present their new understandings through a range of media, such as posters, stories, poetry, plays, multimedia, or dance. The emergence of commonly valued means of presentation could provide alternate and enriching facets of discourse. These expressions could well be highlighted in the university journal report and the teachers' reports. If they are a central focus of reporting, or perhaps a source of data, then there is a likelihood that students will understand some of the content and intent of the reports of the other research partners. Additionally, more interest could be generated in the research by expanding the audience beyond the university community to include other teachers, administrators, parents, classmates, and members of the community at large.

Ethics

Whether or not we invite students to be our research partners, they are involved in our research. It is ultimately about them that we are researching. As Flinders (1992) points out, researchers must move beyond the limited ethical perspectives of an ethical review board, to a more ecological view. A simple promise by researchers not to harm cannot be guaranteed when we recognize the unpredictable nature of a classroom in disequilibrium. Especially when involving children, who are both cherished and dependent, we must consider the subtle interconnectivity of a classroom community. What affects one member of this community, in some way, affects all.

In traditional research, we are minimally bound ethically by having to obtain informed consent. But often, consent for student involvement is given on their behalf. So although they are central to the research, they are generally silent in influencing their own involvement in the

research. If cultural sensitivity is sought, rather than mere consent, students must be recognized as part of the ecological whole of the research team. They must have full, authentic participation. To avoid detachment, rather than merely protecting them from harm, they must become part of the ongoing discourse to resolve power differentials (which may be enormous) and to make real contributions to the determination of research goals and plans.

If responsive communication is needed, rather than just confidentiality, this implies that students will share the language of the research and contribute to the reporting. This does not mean that students have an unreasonable burden of learning a difficult new language or have to report in a highly academic sense. Rather, it means that the language of children gains acceptance in the research environment and that the variety of ways that children express ideas is included as an aspect of reporting.

Including children in research does not compromise their role as students or coerce them into an adult agenda. Their role is still that of learners and much of their school routine remains unchanged. However, the metacognitive activity of reflection and discussion may be increased for students and teachers alike. This requires an adjustment in attitude and self-perception in a community of inquiry. Students begin to gain more control and ownership of their learning and are self-reflective.

Implementation in Our Classroom

I was very fortunate to form a partnership with a dedicated and talented teacher, who I will refer to as Donna Klause. She had developed an interest in taking a more democratic approach in her classroom for her own professional development. This followed a year in which she taught an extremely difficult class to which she felt she had responded in a fairly direct way.

Most of the important themes that arose from this research came from engaging discussions regarding her reflections of our classroom experiences.

Her class was a grade one and two combined class of twenty-two children with a diverse range of abilities, cultures, languages, ages, and personalities. Several children had been identified as having special needs so a classroom assistant was assigned. We sought the approval of the children (and, of course, their parents). This involved a full explanation, including the purpose of the research, each person's role, how it might change the daily routines, and what responsibilities were involved.

The class meeting was an ideal place to begin the research and to center further interactions. Initial approval and negotiations took place in the first class meeting. When all (teacher, university, students, parents, and administration) approved of the research, we selected a limited topic, a classroom issue, with which to begin.

We planned to hold class meetings once each week. At this time, students and teachers would reflect on the week's activities pertaining to the chosen research topic, critically discuss our practice, plan enhancements to our practice, and expand our inquiry to related areas. This expansion included explanations for the students of the curriculum, invitations to critically discuss it, possible activities for addressing the curriculum, and student generated learning goals. Additionally, I would meet with the teacher for a half hour each week regarding professional practice. I would interview each child for 10 to 20 minutes each week regarding the quality of their learning and their reactions to the learning environment. I would regularly observe and take part in classroom activities and take notes. All participants would keep research journals. Clearly, in the case of the children, the scope of these journals was smaller and they used an

alternate means of recording information, such as drawings, scripting, or role play. All interviews, meetings, and observations were recorded on audio tape.

Classroom activities were determined from ongoing practices, individual and group needs, teaching skills, and resources at hand. Suitability, timing, sequence, and degree of change were the objects of careful discussion and analysis. The outcomes of this research would consist of a rich account of a specific setting in which autonomy and responsibility was examined. It was anticipated that both a conceptual and practical model of autonomy and responsibility might emerge within this specific setting.

However, the orderly and systematic plan that we had outlined at the start of the project, consisting of observation schedules, meeting times, and planned activities, quickly gave way to scrambling to find time to talk during the hectic activity typical of elementary school. We found ourselves continually replanning and rescheduling in response to problems, student and adult suggestions, and new ideas. This is the normal procedure in action research, but the pace of change was rapid, complex, and sometimes confusing. Unexpected events, typical in a primary classroom, were common place and these both challenged and enriched the research.

All data was qualitative and collected over eight months from audio taped interviews and conversations, my observations notes, the childrens' research journals, Donna's journal of reflections, and e-mail correspondence.

Donna and I sometimes reflected together in the relative calm, but not free from interruptions, of the classroom after school. More frequently, these discussions took place "on the fly" as we escorted the children to the library or gym, or sometimes a quick word as activities changed. A small graduate research grant allowed us to free Donna for three afternoons during the study where we could speak extensively about the project and in depth regarding the

emerging themes. There were other eclectic and changing sources of data. Donna kept a journal at the start of the project. I took notes in my Palm Pilot. We made erratic attempts at e-mail. I interviewed the children individually and they learned to interview each other. Students wrote and drew in their journals regularly.

The attention span of most students meant that my interviews with them were much briefer than originally planned, in the order of two to five minutes. But the children generally participated in this activity with enthusiasm and provided unique insight into the changes that were developing in the classroom. Eventually, the children began to interview each other, often by themselves. Appropriate interviewing behavior became part of the learning process for all of us. Critical thinking, as to what kinds of information were important and what kinds of sounds were worth recording, was developed, as were creative lines of questioning and interesting verbal styles. Not all of the data from this effort was useful but some was and it was a tangible way for students to be involved in collecting data.

The students wrote and drew in their journals weekly. I did not set standards at the start for this activity, fearing the demand for the format would overwhelm the quality and quantity of the content. This was in contrast to a fairly high standard of neatness and quantity that Donna had established for other writing activities. The result was that there was a mix of useful and uninformative data. Certain children, reluctant to write, produced very little and what they did produce was often of low quality. Many children chose not to draw while others only drew pictures. On the other hand, some children responded with rich, descriptive writing and drawings of high quality, requiring several pages per session. Clearly, these children were the ones who preferred this medium of expression and whose language skills suited the exercise. Conversely, a

few children with very limited verbal or written language skills were able to use this activity to express themselves through drawing and through dictation to the teacher.

The class meeting was the starting point where the topic of research and definitions were first presented. But the format, length, frequency, and style of these meetings changed continuously and were often the subject of discussion themselves. We moved from once per week for twenty minutes to three times per week for shorter times to, eventually, every day. The meetings changed from adult chaired to student chaired. The class meeting format began with students discussing problems that we all had placed on the agenda. We added a time for *compliments* and a time for *successes*. Students began to use the meeting time to plan events. We added partner and small group sessions. We added alternate methods of expression, including role play, posters, and class projects. Although the meetings were the focus of data collection, their format changed dramatically and extended into all aspects of classroom activity. While they worked on their regular school work, children were interviewed about school work and issues related to both learning and the classroom structure. As is summarized later, behavioral issues were addressed inside and outside of the classroom and learning activities emerged through a project based approach.

All of these various interactions (meetings, interviews, performances, conversations during activities) were recorded on audio tape. However, this was not as reliable as one would have expected. Low batteries contributed to loss of data on a couple of occasions, as did general fumbling with tapes. Certain settings contained interfering background noise that made deciphering of the data sometimes difficult and sometimes impossible. Other technical difficulties included a temporary lack of access to e-mail and a hard drive crash that resulted in some data loss.

The primary classroom is a complex and unpredictable place. This characteristic is a major part of the description of the setting and interactions. Clearly, it is also reflected in the research methods and in the data itself. Our action research was cyclic and collaborative but it was not tidy.

Results

As we explored participatory democracy, many emergent properties of our classroom community could be identified. I will describe three of them. As mentioned, we began with (1) the Class Meeting. These meetings explored solutions to ongoing problems with behavior in the classroom and on the playground. The class reached its first apparent consensus (though this could be disputed) in constructing (2) Seven Strategies to Deal with Problems. The class meetings became more proactive and students participated in the planning and implementation of (3) Various Projects carried out in groups, with partners, or individually. Alternate means of expression were a constant need for many students due to English being a second language or having weaker verbal abilities. In the language of complexity theory, these three developments were among the emergent properties of our particular participatory democracy.

These activities were significant in that they prompted an awareness of the ecology of this learning community. They suggested a teaching strategy that bounded our activities in that active and creative space between order and chaos. We called this strategy framing.

Class Meetings

Class meetings served as an entry point for the research project. At the first meeting, I was introduced and given the opportunity to address the class and to invite them to participate with Donna and myself in research. Being a primary class, they were already experienced with the word research and with some of its activities. I described to them what I was interested in

researching and explained the concepts of autonomy, responsibility, democracy, and community. It was interesting to see how they readily linked these ideas to interactions with friends and it was clear how important friends were to them. This importance extended beyond just friendliness to power and politics within the classroom and on the playground. It was the basic way in which these children understood community.

We collectively began to define the parameters of the class meeting. Initially, it was explained as a time to discuss issues that affected the class. It was essentially time for problem solving and planning, although, until near the end of the study, problem solving dominated. The idea of an agenda was introduced to them. Donna placed the first item on the agenda which was concerned with an actual, contentious problem in the grade one-two combined classroom involving some of the older children manipulating and excluding some of the younger children. She couched this issue in a discussion of respect for one another. The idea of the agenda, as a tool to reserve time during the class meeting to discuss issues, quickly caught on. It became a device for airing grievances, such as how to handle a situation when people make mean faces. Soon the agenda became much too long to effectively address issues in a timely fashion, especially with meetings scheduled only once per week. We added two more weekly meetings and eventually incorporated class meetings as a daily routine, with extra meetings for special events, activities, or plans. Indeed, the time of day and the length of meetings became a contested issue in itself, never fully realizing resolution. However, almost all students enthusiastically participated in presenting issues for the class and in brainstorming solutions and strategies. The leadership of the meetings moved from being teacher chaired to student chaired, beginning with those students who had demonstrated good leadership skills. At the recommendation of the students, adults provided reminders regarding proper listening behavior and refocused the

attention of class members during the meetings. Some students clearly enjoyed the status of chairing the meetings. Some students showed amazing leadership skills and insight into the interactive process of the meetings. Some students enjoyed being the center of attention and focused more on ego-centric activities, such as talking extensively and repetitively about their issues, and refusing to accept suggestions. Some students did not participate at all initially due to limited language skills or an aversion to drawing attention to themselves. However, even these students eventually began to participate both in leading the meetings (often with partners) and in contributing to the discussions. Donna and I also began to divide the class into small groups or partners to discuss issues after they were presented and to share their resulting ideas with the whole class later. Journals were used by the students after the class meetings to record their summaries of the issues or to suggest new ideas through writing and drawing. We also, as mentioned, maximized participation through various alternate activities such as the creation of posters and the use of role play to explore recurring social themes.

During the course of the research, Donna and I noticed an increase in language skills in all of the children who initially had limited verbal functioning. For example Roy, who initially avoided speaking, limiting his responses to one word utterances, eventually would lead the class meeting with minimal assistance. We cannot claim that the increased interaction during the meetings caused this improvement but this increase was noticeable both during the meetings and at other times. The verbal orientation of the meeting, supported with alternate means of expression, seemed to enhance verbal language development. We also noticed, in regard to language development that in the early class meetings, students tended to use a *teacher approved* type of language in offering contributions to discussions. In other words, students used language that they had heard adults use to encourage appropriate classroom behavior. For example, at one

early class meeting, Adam complimented his teacher. “I like the way Ms. Klause is our teacher and when we get over control, then she comes in and gives us a gentle reminder.” Clearly he was trying to imitate (“over control”) and used phrases that he normally would not (“gentle reminder”). As the process continued, and as the issues became more relevant to them, students used natural, purposeful language, rather than language that imitated adults. In one instance, Ellen’s description of how she tried to solve a problem illustrated an authentic use of six-year-old language. “Like and I said and Jenny was going to chase them but I said just ignore them because they’re just being mean to you.” Grammar improves with practice but this revealed a natural tone that was embedded in efforts to express original ideas. Students also began to use the language of responsibility, autonomy, and community, although they seldom used those actual words. Rather, they would describe thoughts that were oriented toward a concern for others and their own roles in the classroom, such as who could best help a classmate lead a meeting.

The underlying principles of the Participatory Democracy, full participation and inclusion, led me to advocate consensus, complete agreement by class members, in decision-making. This proved challenging and forced us to adopt a realistic perspective toward consensus building in a diversified and schedule-driven school. It was also in conflict with the entrenched method of group decision-making: voting. Voting, while considered (even among most adults) to be a cornerstone of the democratic process, quickly showed itself to be a disruptive influence on the creation of a sense of community. When used near the start of the research project, it divided the class into winners and losers, favoring the popular and marginalizing those with less political influence. It was interesting to see the competition involved in voting overwhelm the issues it was intended to resolve.

Seven Problem Solving Strategies

In the initial class meetings, the class spent several sessions on the general topic of how to solve problems among class members. The brainstorming of problem solving strategies was recorded on chart paper. I took these chart papers home and condensed the ideas into eight general categories which I presented at the next class meeting. Among these eight problem solving strategies was *revenge*. This was our first authentic contentious issue. Strong personalities spoke on both sides of the issue of whether or not revenge was an appropriate way to solve problems. The language was emotional and showed deep personal commitment, rather than being imitated adult discourse. The debate raged for several days with both sides making well thought out points. Eventually, those who were against the concept of revenge were able to explain clearly to the others what they thought revenge meant and to convince them that it was not as effective a strategy as they had initially thought. These student explanations, rather than any adult influence, enabled us to reach a consensus on a very difficult topic. The remaining seven categories were (1) show respect, (2) talk it out, (3) be assertive, (4) tell an adult, (5) ignore, (6) include everyone, and (7) change the subject. These became a reference for students when future problems were discussed. Students often drew upon this resource in offering suggestions to social problems raised at class meetings.

Projects

Although students made many innovations in problem solving techniques, they were not taking ownership of other classroom activities, curriculum, or assessment. In response, Donna instituted a project-based approach to some of the curricular activities. She consulted the government mandated Integrated Resource Plans (IRPs) and considered her students' interests in setting fairly broad topics, such as The Solar System. Rather than everyone doing the same

activity and producing the same product, she offered several possible approaches to creating a project of interest to each student. Some worked in partners or groups, some individually. Some created books, some built models, some designed posters, but it was open to individual innovations. All were accountable for their research by making a presentation to the class and by writing an explanation (with varying levels of assistance). In this way, the mandated curriculum was addressed but each student was also able to pursue particular interests according to a preferred method. Most notable about this approach was not the quality of the products presented but rather, the change in the quality of the process in project-based activities compared to other activities. Each student was engaged in his or her project. The presentations of their projects were a celebration rather than a fearful, self-conscious evaluation. It is difficult to determine if there was a relative quantitative increase in learning, but clearly, each child was a confident 'expert' in the knowledge that they had personally gathered. They also learned a great deal from each other as the ensuing discussions revealed. It was doubtful that anything was lost in terms of learning but much was gained in terms of attitude, motivation, and quality with regard to the process of learning. Also significant was that the discourse, with which the students created their learning community, was extended beyond the class meeting into their daily learning activities. All participated enthusiastically in projects with few problems regarding the nature of their interactions, although these interactions were often intense. Verbal discourse was the main method of interacting but, rather than all students demonstrating their learning in the same way, each chose their own presentation method. It could be verbal, written, artistic, demonstrative, musical, kinesthetic, or even a Lego construction. It was an activity that best suited their needs and preferences, and yet shared a personal understanding with the rest of their learning

community. The way behavioral expectations and learning activities were negotiated, or framed, is an interesting subject.

Frames

The project approach that was initiated during our research in this class allowed self-organization and framed the limits between chaos and order. This is an example of liberating structures discussed by Davis, et al (2000, p. 87). In our case, the teacher set a topic based on the publicly mandated curriculum but allowed a great deal of freedom as to how the topic was researched and presented. The curriculum itself was interpreted for the children and open to questions and suggestions. Negotiation was a central feature of this approach. Students and teacher negotiated the frames within which the projects took place. Students negotiated with each other as to the specific construction of the projects. They decided on the content, the format, and the make up of the group (or whether they worked alone) and the roles of each person.

The idea of framing is itself interesting and complex. In a participatory democracy, the frames may not be as fixed as it might otherwise be assumed. The frames must be clear for all concerned or insecurity will result in a search for the limits of behavior. But frames vary from activity to activity, from day to day, and from setting to setting. A teacher may wish to have a very narrow framework with limited freedoms for a new activity and gradually broaden the frame as students demonstrate their responsibility. Different teachers will have varying levels of comfort with frames. Framing responds to disequilibrium and as such is a constant focus for the reflection of teachers within a democratic setting. It is ultimately part of the teacher's responsibility and authority to establish the framework for learning, but a democratic teacher seeks the input of students and clarifies the framework to explain the purpose and the limits for

behavior. In discussing the topic of framing and interpreting the curriculum for very young children, Donna said

They don't know what they should know. They don't know what the possibilities are. But we can explore it first and maybe say we're going to use as many ideas as we can. If they come up with five and they're relevant and on topic, then we'll use them. But [I] have veto power if it doesn't address the things we're supposed to be covering....But to actually present the IRPs [public curriculum], I'll have to interpret because of the language (In conversation, February, 2000).

She finds an IRP goal that states "Describe the basic structure of the various organs involved in speech and hearing." Realizing our students will never understand that language, we interpret: "What we're supposed to do here is figure out how our body helps us talk and hear." Then students engaged in their increasingly familiar brainstorming and categorizing for activities to research the topic. One kind of brainstorming activity was "What we Know/What we Wonder" in which we listed first everything that was already known about the topic and what we wondered about became the areas that we were going to research. We called this process "guided participation" because it was open ended within limits or frames.

The curriculum was used as a general guide or frame setting tool rather than a prescription. It was opened for students to understand and to question. It was used much like a checklist to see what we had learned and what else we still needed to cover. In a sense, the class was guiding the curriculum rather than the curriculum setting the course of study. It was very much a co-evolution. Still we met much of the curriculum, as much as most teachers do, but we also addressed other important issues along the way. The difference from a traditional approach

to curriculum was in the degree of ownership and the internalization of learning and of those structures that supported learning.

The use of frames, or liberating structures, help to provide order at the edge of chaos. They define the limits of activity and behavior but allow freedom, individuality, and creativity. In a participatory democracy frames are clarified, explained, and often negotiated.

There clearly is an awareness of ecology within the described community. But there must be an awareness of the ecology among this community and its larger environment as well. Just as individuals must be responsible to the good of the whole class, the class must be responsible to the collective wishes of the public. Using frames and an open approach to curriculum identifies individual needs, strengths, and styles, while respecting the public will. Curriculum is explained, criticized, and adapted, but allows the inclusion of individual learning pursuits. Curriculum is regarded as a resource rather than a prescription.

Complexity

As previously discussed, Complexity Theory provides a helpful way of thinking in attempting to understand a community. It is particularly useful within the concept of a participatory democracy, as developed here, with its complex intertwining of autonomy, responsibility, and authority. The language and concepts of Complexity Theory both emerged from our classroom experiences and also helped to frame our understanding of those experiences. Indeed, the importance of accepting complexity in a democratic classroom was an outcome of the research itself. A community is not *built* from a collection of parts, such as programs, methods, curricula, or administrative directives. Rather, it evolves from small beginnings and develops gradually through the interactions of individual members with a regard for the whole, and is significantly greater than the sum of its parts. This, no doubt, will be

disappointing to those immersed in the prevalent mindset of solutions, quick cures, concrete methods, formulas, ready-made techniques, and transferable programs - “Something practical that I can use on Monday morning.” Further, every community is unique. Our story, hopefully, may be enlightening but it is not a prescription for building a universal participatory democratic community.

Considerations for Practice

I now offer the following reflections prompted by the preceding experiences in an emergent participatory democracy in a grade one-two public classroom:

1. A community is not built from discrete parts nor assembled according to a standard blueprint. Rather it must be allowed to emerge from the interaction of its members, allowing for change and unpredictability.
2. In a participatory democratic community, there is constant tension between autonomy and responsibility, diversity and inclusion, and chaos and order. Therefore participants must embrace complexity.
3. Products that represent learning are part of a process that continually moves in a state of stable disequilibrium based on the evolution of the community.
4. Ongoing reflection is essential to assess the past and plan the next steps. A teacher can benefit from the discourse available through partnerships with other educators in a collegial professional environment.
5. Constant self-organization provides the stability within the disequilibrium of a developing community. In a participatory democracy, students participate in that self-organization.

6. We must be aware of the ecology of the classroom. All participants co-evolve with the developing community and the environment. The teacher forms strong relationships with students and focuses on the relationships and patterns in the class.
7. Equality, participation, inclusion, and agreement are ideals to guide us but not practical achievements.
8. It is useful to reflect on the emergent properties of a community, its developing shared values, and its shared consciousness. This knowledge provides enlightenment regarding the next steps on the path ahead.
9. Autonomy, responsibility, and other democratic elements make sense only in the understanding and commitment that participants have for their community. An exploration of the ways that a sense of community, or a shared consciousness, can be developed is of critical importance.
10. We must further discuss how to navigate the tensions caused by personal and public curriculum, individual and standard assessments of learning, student autonomy and responsibility, diversity and inclusion, and many other matters that swirl at the edge of chaos.

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