Josh Thomases believes that an educator's most important role is to create classrooms that are grounded in the practices of democracy. This article discusses the principles of a democratic classroom, and how implementing these principles can create a powerful environment where extensive and in-depth learning truly happens.

We live in a democracy, and young people must learn how to participate in that democracy as part of their education. This statement, which seems axiomatic, has profound implications for the practice of teaching and learning. It challenges the essential principles of school as we have come to know them in this country. It changes the way classrooms and curricula are established. It alters the roles of all participants in classes. Ultimately, accepting this statement as a founding principle implies a radical reconceptualization of our classrooms and our schools.

This reconceptualization happens in very concrete ways. I do not hand out a syllabus on the first day of 11th grade United States history at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice. Nor do I review the Declaration of Independence or the structures of our government. Instead, the first week of class is spent creating a “Problem Tree.”

Modeled after one used by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, this activity is designed to engage students in a process of looking at the world around them. This work is grounded in the philosophy of the Academy, where our mission is to inspire and nurture leadership for peace and justice.

The Problem Tree
The young people of El Puente are profoundly aware of the human rights inequities they face and struggle with every day. The activities associated with the Problem Tree, then, are a natural place for them to begin (see Activity 1 and the figure that follows).

ACTIVITY 1

1. Students fill out a brainstorming sheet, answering questions about their knowledge and experiences.
2. The class develops a list of problems in the world. The results are placed as leaves on the branches of the tree.
3. In small groups, students fill in the causes of these problems. The results, which reflect their experiences in the U.S. and how they understand these experiences, will include some misconceptions to be addressed during the course. For now, each idea is important and is placed on the trunk of the tree.
4. The class tries to develop historical reasons for the above. When it becomes clear that they do not have the answers, they are encouraged to develop a list of questions instead. This list, supplemented with my own questions, forms the basis for the curriculum.

From the very first day, the students know that this is a different kind of course. Their questions are part of the course; their voice and their thoughts help determine what we study; and I am one participant in the class rather than a dominant force. My job for the rest of the year will be to slowly expand the role of students as they take on the responsibility of learning and leading their class. This is vital to the Academy because our students do more than just study; they are involved in activities that range from testifying at City Hall to doing an extensive asthma survey to creating a community vendors’ market for economic development. Active participation in democratic classrooms is one important way for our students to learn to become leaders for peace and justice.

Principles of a Democratic Classroom
A healthy democracy involves conflict and challenges authority; a classroom that is based on democratic principles does too. The actual practice of engaging democratic pedagogy in the classroom, therefore, is a complex undertaking. Though there are still rules and guidelines for the class, the basic set of principles differ from those in traditional schools:
• *Education must be relevant.* It should speak to young people's history, address their needs, and be respectful of them. It must help students to take the power that is rightfully theirs and teach them to use that power responsibly.

• *Education must be challenging.* It is not merely an interesting set of activities, but rather a way of learning that liberates the participant from obstacles that prevent the fulfillment of their potential. It pushes people to become aware of their sociopolitical, historical, economic, and physical reality and then learn how to change it.

• *Education is about creating democracy.* Democracy can only happen with an engaged populace who understand the issues and know how to participate in public debate to further their agenda. This process begins in the classroom. To construct a truly democratic society you cannot use authoritarian methods.

• *Education must be participatory.* In order for students to become independent thinkers and learners, they must participate in the construction of the course of study. The learning process is developed through a continuous dialogue between all members of a class.

• *Education must have value.* What the class produces at the end of its work must be of value to the students themselves. If the students are to feel ownership of the class, they must have some control over how they demonstrate what they have learned.

• *Education must have a facilitator.* The role of the teacher as transmitter of information changes drastically to that of a
facilitator who encourages, supports, and challenges the class in their learning process.

The principles of a democratic classroom help create a process that both supports democracy and establishes school as a place where extensive and in-depth learning truly happens in all subjects. Although my experiences with negotiating the curriculum are in social studies classes, the model can and has been applied to other subjects in the Academy. A biology class, for example, was transformed into Science for Community Action. The students, knowing that they live in the most toxic neighborhood in New York City, took on an epidemiological survey which points to our community as having three times the asthma rate of the nation. The class first studied the factors that may cause asthma and then proposed solutions to the crisis. In another example, a mathematics facilitator consistently engages her classes in conversations about what they want and need to know. Through these conversations, the students come to grips with the skills they need to have for college preparations and beyond.

Issues of democracy, therefore, are as central to the study of statistics and genetics as they are to the study of the civil rights movement. To deny this fact is to deny the true power and scope of our democracy.

Implementing an Empowering Education and Negotiating the Curriculum

Some of the central principles listed above come out of a book entitled Negotiating the Curriculum. Negotiation is powerful in that it questions the basic principles of traditional school and offers new ways to think about educational pedagogy and learning. The authors propose four central questions in negotiation:

1. What do we know already?
2. What do we want [and need] to find out?
3. How will we go about finding out [what we want to know]?
4. How will we know, and show, that we've found out when we are finished?

When I began to develop my classes around these questions, I discovered the extent to which negotiating the curriculum radically altered my conception of school and deepened the implications of a truly democratic school.

Accessing Students’ Knowledge and Developing Their Questions

The question of how to apply these four questions in class poses a challenge for the facilitator. My process begins by developing my own answers to the first two negotiation questions. This is important because I cannot design a learning process for others if I do not know what I want. In preparing for my senior Participation in Government class I note:

The goals of the course should be to explore the variety of ways in which we have been affected by government, have responded to government action, and have attempted to make change. We will study the civil rights movement and locate El Puente within the history of community organizing and social activism.

Once I have my sense of what I want in the course, I can bring my students through a similar brainstorming process, as demonstrated in the series of processes in Activity 2, which follows.

ACTIVITY 2

Day 1. Introduce and discuss the four central questions of negotiating the curriculum. For homework, list all the ways in which government affects your life. Star the ones you would like to change.

Day 2. Review lists and put them on the board. Create a generalized list of roles that government plays. Discuss which roles are controversial. For homework, discuss actions in response to government that you have participated in or witnessed. Which ones were the most powerful?

Day 3. Create lists of actions. Discuss what makes a successful action. Which of these actions were the most important? Do you know of other people in history who took action for similar reasons? Who were they? What did they do?

Day 4. Create a timeline of key names and events over the last 50 years either by people in government or by those taking action in response to or in protest of government policy. At home, look at the past week. What do you want to know more about? List your questions.

Day 5. Develop collective list of questions. Create general sets of questions that go together. Develop class consensus on the most important questions. For homework, find and bring in a resource that will help us answer at least one of the questions.

Day 6. Present a proposed curriculum based on the questions of the class. Review it; alter it; develop consensus agreement to follow it. Begin the curriculum.

The resulting curriculum engages, if not answers, the first two questions of negotiation. It establishes the central questions of the course which, by any measure, are good questions for a Participation in Government class. For instance, “How do people in government make decisions?” And “Was the civil rights movement successful?” I am pleased with the curriculum because it not only reflects my idea about what to teach; it includes the students’ ideas about what to learn.

The Nature of the Classroom

The final two questions of negotiating the curriculum are more difficult to implement. The third, how we go about finding out what we want to know, speaks to what happens in the class itself. For example:
- How will we spend our time?
- What will homework look like?
- Where and how will we find the answers to our questions?

There are no correct answers to these questions. One senior government class preferred that I present the information to them. They wanted to spend their time debating and discussing rather than investigating—as long as I did not make it too boring! How, you might ask, is this different from a traditional classroom? The students thought through how best to learn, and explicitly asked for my expertise. The principles of negotiating the curriculum are thriving in classes where students demand the answers to their questions.

Many educators, and most students, think of learning as the transmission of information. Negotiating the curriculum rejects this assumption. The challenge is having enough time to both let the class imagine and explore possible ways to learn, while still making sure there is sufficient time left to study the subject matter in depth. I found that balance during a U.S. history project on immigration, as detailed in Activity 3, which progressed over a period of several weeks.

ACTIVITY 3

1. Develop a set of questions on immigration based on what the students know and what they want to find out. Questions range from “Do immigrants help or hurt the economy?” to “What type of support (if any) should immigrants receive when they arrive in the U.S.?”

2. Students choose one of the questions as the basis of a research paper.

3. Students working on similar questions are grouped together as they research, write, revise, and complete the papers over several weeks.

4. Classes alternate between group work time and presentations by the facilitator to fill in the history of immigration that will not be covered by student research.

5. Upon completion, the papers are photocopied and handed out to the class. The papers supply the content for our immigration debate.

6. Modeled after the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, we hold a full-day confer-
ence during which we try to reach answers to the original questions the students asked. These answers, in the form of resolutions, become the final documents for their immigration portfolio.

What About Standards?
The final negotiation question—how we know, and show, that we’ve found out when we are finished—is a way of assessing what we have learned. But what are the standards by which we will judge the quality? Engaging students in this conversation means that standards cease to be foreign measures of quality and become the students’ own measure of themselves. Though definitions about grades are certainly helpful (“What is an ‘A’ paper, and how is it different from a ‘B’ paper?”), there are more fundamental questions: How can students recognize when they have learned something, and how do they measure the extent of that learning? Is it an external measure such as presentation? Is it internal recognition? The measures must be developed with the students. This is the area in which students are most accustomed to feeling frustrated and disempowered. It is where they will look first to see if the facilitator is truly committed to a democratic classroom.

Certain aspects of learning can neither be weighed nor measured. Sometimes, as was the case in our exploration of immigration policy (see Activity 3), students come to realize that difficult questions do not always have answers and that deeper understanding of a complex issue comes through learning. The fact that we do not have the language of measurement does not mitigate the quality of that learning. The challenge lies in changing the nature of assessment to allow for and acknowledge other kinds of learning.

The Role of Facilitators
The most difficult task implicit in negotiating the curriculum is defining the role of the facilitator, a job that becomes greatly expanded in a democratic classroom.

Basic Principles
Be connected to the students.
An empowering education is possible only if our relationships with students are firmly grounded in honesty and trust. If young people are to negotiate their learning, that process must be safe and respected. We must come to know our students as individuals, and be open to supporting them in their human development; for it is that development that encourages or inhibits their ability and interest in learning.

Be open to criticism.
Remaining open to criticism is one of the major challenges created in a democratic classroom. We must come to terms with... how to engage criticism in ways that not only emphasize the validity of the conversation, but teach young people how to challenge responsibly.

Pose critical questions.
The facilitator should establish an atmosphere where deep, thoughtful conversations can happen, and in this process, play the role of guide, leader, listener, mentor, storyteller, and problem-poser. In all of these, the ability to ask questions that push students to challenge themselves is of paramount importance. One constant struggle for facilitators is the balance between pushing students in a certain direction and letting them choose their own route. When, where, and how do we use our authority?

Embrace different learning styles.
For all students to become active participants in the class, facilitators must support different ways of learning. For instance, students do not sit in rows and lesson plans may have to be altered as students focus a discussion. The resulting energy for learning will be much more powerful and engaging, but will look different than in traditional classrooms—that is, not as quiet. We must openly embrace this difference even as it challenges us.

Acknowledge limits to negotiation.
It is important that facilitators make students aware of what is not negotiable in the classroom, and, most importantly, why. Sometimes external forces, ranging from assistant principals to the State Education Department, determine what is negotiable. In an empowering education, however, these issues of power must be addressed openly and honestly. We must discuss what we have to do, why, and whether it is worth challenging these limits.

Establish our parameters to negotiation.
Facilitators also set their own limits for their classes. We neither surrender our ability to conceive and dream of what our classes should be like, nor our right and responsibility to include certain topics or exercises. What changes is our responsibility to partner with the students in those decisions. We must present and defend our actions.
Utilize consistent democratic practices.

All of these principles cannot be implemented in a piecemeal fashion or when it is convenient. While implementation is difficult, the commitment to a democratic classroom must always be present, ideally in all classes and across curricula. To do any less is to revert to authoritarian teacher-controlled classes where the few examples of democracy are seen as evidence of teacher hypocrisy.

The Challenge of Implementation

As previously stated, a democratic classroom is not tidy. Since most of us grew up in very neat classrooms, we must move slowly into this process. I did not begin by negotiating everything, but started in one class, with one unit, which I expanded slowly into two classes.

Negotiating the classroom involves intense learning. Facilitators need time to reflect on their values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in the classroom, and how those impact their practice and define their educational philosophy. These concepts must therefore be implemented slowly, to allow time to think about and appreciate what we are trying to accomplish and its implications.

In terms of the students, the issues are even more complex. What is their conception of school? How is their sense of discipline, responsibility, and learning? The challenge of implementing democratic pedagogy is that it involves consistent reflection as we question and revise our practice. There are no final answers when it comes to the development of human beings, be they facilitators or students.

The Future of Our Schools

As educators, the most important action we can take is creating classrooms that are grounded in the principles of an empowering educa-

---

Joshua Sean Thomases was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. He received his B.A. from Wesleyan University, CT, and is currently completing his master’s at Bank Street School of Education, NY. He has been affiliated with El Puente for over five years and is currently a Senior Facilitator in the Academy for Peace and Justice. He is committed to the further development of the Academy, where strong academic skills are grounded in the fight for human rights and social justice for all people.