

Sharing Power with Students: The Democratic Differentiated Classroom

Sheryn Waterman, Literacy Coach, Lowe's Grove Middle School

I never thought I would say this, but we teachers need to give our students more power in the classroom. I know I have said it many times, and I have heard my colleagues say it, "These kids have too much power!" But I am beginning to believe that the problem is not that students have too much power, it's that they do not have enough. Think about it, most of the problems in the classroom result from power struggles between teachers and students. The battle for power between teachers and students can cause discipline and motivation issues. It seems obvious that both those students who challenge authority and those who do not do their work want more power. Why not give it to them?

With raised awareness of these power struggles, research inspired me to develop a new way of teaching that allows the sharing of power with students. I have written a book about this new way of teaching called *The Democratic Differentiated Classroom* (2006). I have been working on these ideas for some time and have used them with a variety of middle school students from remedial reading classes to honors classes, and, for me, this model has worked exceptionally well. When students share power with me, they "buy in" to the class rules and to the work they will do to show learning; therefore, very few of them misbehave and very few if any of them fail to do the work of the class. When I began using this model, I stopped writing referrals, except on rare occasions. And remarkably, no one fails my class!

I developed this model following extensive research on teaching and learning. Two of the most influential sources were *Democracy in Education* (Dewey, 1916) and *Why We Do What We Do* (Deci, 1995). From reading John Dewey's work, I was inspired to find ways to align my instruction with students' needs because, as Dewey says, unless students see value in the lessons taught in school, they are not as ready and willing to go along with the teachers' plans. Deci's work furthered the notion that motivation needs to flow from "within" the person, not imposed from an outside source. Offering choices to students is a major goal of the strategy called differentiation, a concept proposed by Tomlinson (1995) some years ago. Differentiation is a strategy whereby teachers adjust instruction to meet the needs of students. Secondary teachers have struggled with the concept of differentiation because it seems almost impossible to meet the needs of so many students. It seems reasonable to differentiate for the 25 or so students in an elementary classroom, but when you multiply that number by the number of classes we teach in secondary education, the task seems daunting. In middle school, my *democratic differentiation model* is easier than the models proposed by Tomlinson and others (1995). Instead of the teacher always being responsible for tailoring her instruction to address every learning style, interest, or ability level, she shares that responsibility with her

students. She helps her students discover their learning styles, interests, and ability levels so that they might make good learning choices.

Making good choices is the goal of the democratic differentiated classroom. Too many students leave our schools without having enough practice in making good choices as evidenced by the dropout rate and the number of students who choose alcohol, drugs and crime. We teachers have taken so much control of the learning environment that we have not helped our students *practice* making good choices. Many parents help their children learn to make good choices, but not all homes are equipped to guide those good choices. Teachers can support good parenting and fill in the gap for poor parenting.

Many educators say, "School is not a democracy!" Does this mean that schools are dictatorships? If students live in a democratic society, shouldn't they be privileged to the rights of that society in our schools? Is it because they are children? Children do have rights in a democratic society, but we all know that they need to learn from parents and teachers how to use those rights responsibly. If we deny those rights in our schools, how will students learn to make decisions responsibly? If our democratic society is to survive, our students need to learn to seek a balance between shared decision-making and individual responsibilities. Children who learn to find this balance will become the educated citizenry of our democratic society in the future.

If a school is organized like a family, then teachers need to learn from what good families do. In good families strong parents help their children learn to make good choices. They protect their children as they increasingly allow them to make their own choices. Good teachers are like good parents. They scaffold learning experiences until their students can take more responsibility and make more choices on their own. Unfortunately, some teachers never seem to take down the scaffold and never allow their students to try out their own ideas. This rigidity cripples the abilities of students to participate in a free society.

In the *democratic differentiated classroom*, the teacher shares decision-making with her students. She helps students learn about themselves, she shows students ways to learn, and most importantly, she respects students' abilities to make choices. In this classroom, students have a voice, and they vote on what they want to do as a group. They learn how to reach consensus, how to compromise, and how to do what is right for the benefit of the group. They learn through a real-world process that they cannot always have what they want if they are participating in a group and that what they learn has relevance to their growth and development as individuals. They also learn that many issues are out of their control, but that by developing a positive attitude and some useful strategies, they can better deal with whatever they have to face in life.

When it comes to addressing students' behaviors, the teacher who decides to use the *democratic differentiated classroom* model understands that

reward and punishment are unnecessary. The research is conclusive that reward and punishment strategies work against positive learning experiences (Jenson, 1998). If teachers truly respect their students, they will celebrate success and acknowledge excellence in place of using rewards as bribes. They will also use the natural consequences of poor choices as teachable moments rather than using punishment to *make* students comply.

So how does it work? I can explain to you how I use this model, but I encourage you to adapt it to meet your own needs. I base this model on a constructivist philosophy of learning (Brooks & Brooks 1993), which asserts that students construct meaning for themselves. I also use “learner-centered” models (Fogarty, 1995), a problem-type matrix (Maker, 1996), and the classroom meeting (Nelson, 1996). The curriculum design model I use in this innovation is concept-based (Erickson, 2002, Wiggins & McTighe 1998) as follows:

1. Big idea (concept, theme, understanding, etc.) which comes from my Standard Course of Study
2. Essential Questions
3. Skills and Knowledge
4. Acceptable Evidence
5. Activities

Using my philosophy of learning and from what I consider to be the best method of curriculum design, I have constructed a process I call “Student-Led Unit Planning.” The overview of this process is expanded in my book, *The Democratic Differentiated Classroom* published by Eye on Education (Waterman, 2006). I also used information from my book, published under my previous name, Sheryn Northey, called *Handbook on Differentiating Instruction in Middle and High Schools* (2005) that is a user-friendly guide to basic differentiation strategies. Here is a step-by-step overview of the “Student-led Unit Planning Process” from my book.

Student-Led Unit Planning

Step 1: Listing Choices

Make a list of the *themes* (or concepts or theme/concepts) within your discipline. Give the list to your students and ask them to keep the list in their notebooks for the entire year. Here are a few theme ideas: power, change, systems, relationships, water, heroes, and diversity. Themes can be a word or a phrase. They can be overarching ideas or more specific topics. If you do not want to let students vote on themes/concepts, they could vote on which chapter in the textbook to start with, or you could give them a limited number of topics from which to choose.

Step 2: Voting

Have a meeting of the class to determine which theme (or concept, etc.) should guide the development of the unit of study. Use this process:

1. Teacher asks students to suggest a theme and explain why they want that theme.
2. Teacher writes the theme on the board and asks if any other students want to speak on behalf of that theme or against that theme.
3. Every student has a chance to suggest a theme.
4. After all themes are on the board, students vote on their favorites and majority determines the direction of the study.

Step 3: KWL

As soon as possible, do a KWL (What students already **K**now about the theme, what they **W**ant to learn about the theme, and how they want to **L**earn about the theme. After you find out what they already **K**now about the theme, then you discuss what they **W**ant to learn. When you discuss what they want to learn, (the W) begin the backward design process and ask students to develop generalizations, essential questions, skills and knowledge, acceptable evidence, and activities. When I address the Learn part of the KWL, I discover that most often, students will want to do a creative project they choose. Also, they will most likely want to learn with a partner or in a small group.

Step 4: Planning

This is where you and students separate so they may explore how they might chose to learn about the theme, and you begin planning how you will address the theme in terms of your standard course of study, skills and knowledge, acceptable evidence, and activities you will plan for the unit. You will write your unit plan, and students will either choose from a list of differentiated projects ideas or prepare a proposal for an open-ended project about how they might answer one or more of the essential questions the class has determined. I use a "Project Proposal" form when I assign an open-ended theme-based project for any unit of study. Students fill out this form with the teacher's assistance and then take a certain amount of time to prepare their projects. Note about Deadlines: The time limits may be determined through collaboration with the teacher. If students help establish deadlines, you will have less complaining when the deadlines occur.

Step 5: Conferences

Briefly meet with each person or group to go over their project ideas to make sure they are heading in a good direction. Here are some guidelines:

- Ask them questions that get them to focus on attainable learning goals.

- Do not let them get too ambitious or too narrow or shallow.
- Help them choose measurable objectives within their chosen theme.
- Make sure they understand what kinds of data they might need to gather in order to answer their essential questions.
- Make sure they have the equipment and capability of completing the products they would like to produce. For instance, some students may want to make a movie, but have no camera or film editing capabilities.
- Help them learn to discuss metacognitive skills (talking about their learning) so that they know to write about the “skills” and “knowledge” they will gain as they investigate their chosen theme.
- Give struggling students lots of examples and help if you want them to successfully design their project.
- Do not let them set themselves up to fail.
- Helpful hint: Discuss the project with them as you would discuss planning a lesson with a colleague. This is true collaboration that will help students share the responsibility for their learning.

If you allow students to take this kind of responsibility for their learning, you may need to provide some accountability structure like time sheets or periodic checks on progress.

Step 6: Consensus Rubric

After students have determined the direction of their projects, hold a classroom meeting during which the class as a whole determines the standards for the project. These standards will be reflected in a *consensus rubric*. Give students a blank rubric and work together as a whole class to decide what each level looks like as it is applied to the projects they are preparing. Ask students to fill in the rubric as the class decides the categories and levels of achievement for each of those categories. This is an exciting process because students generally have high standards for their work. Try to get at least three good descriptive phrases for each level under each category. Key questions to use as you are guiding students through this process are as follows:

- What categories should we use to evaluate our projects?
- Does ... (a suggested category) fit under another category or can it stand alone?
Some typical categories might be the following: organization, accuracy, originality, sufficiency, creativity, and/or technical quality
- What does a 4 look like? (And continue through 1)
- What point value does each level get? (I suggest for 4 categories: 4=25, 3=20, 2=15, and 1=10)

I suggest the following points and grades: 4= student receives all points (A+). 3=loss of 1-15 points (A to B-), 2=loss of 16-30 (C+ to D-) points, and 1=loss of all to 31 points (F).

Step 7: Presentation

A few days before the project is due, have students sign up to present their projects. On the sign-up sheet include who is presenting, what they are presenting, what equipment they might need, and how much time they need. This sheet will help you determine how much class time will be needed and what needs to be set up to make sure the project presentations flow smoothly.

I have implemented “Student-led Unit Planning” in my classroom, which is within a traditional middle school setting. Nelson Beaudoin, who is the award-winning principal of Kennebunk High School in Kennebunk, Maine, is using similar ideas about sharing power at the school level (2005). Beaudoin (pronounced Bo’ din) is the author of *Elevating Student Voice: How to Enhance Participation, Citizenship, and Leadership* (published by Eye on Education) in which he demonstrates what schools can do to make students visible and relevant so that they might practice democracy and civic responsibility. He provides both anecdotal evidence and hard data that show how schools can implement student-directed events, service learning, and extra-curricular activities with excellent results.

If we are looking for educational change, I know these ideas are on the right track. If our goal as a country is to promote democracy around the world, why not fight for those values right here in our own schools? Educators like Nelson Beaudoin and I are convinced that to preserve our precious democracy, we must offer our young people a school experience that prepares them not only to be informed global citizens for the future, but that also puts the values of democracy to work in their present. The old power-over authoritarian hierarchical ways of doing things are already being dismantled, especially in the corporate world, to make way for more enlightened methods that allow power and decision-making to be shared among all constituents.

These types of democratic educational models can be challenging and difficult, but they do not require adults to give all their power to the students. These models only ask that teachers and administrators respect and trust their students enough to believe they can actually share the power of learning. They provide a better way to teach than the old-fashioned carrot and stick approach of rewards and punishments that only bribe students. If we train students the way we train animals, they will behave like animals. If we educate students to respect one another and share power fairly, we might all have a more civilized school experience.

References

Beaudoin, N. (2005). *Elevating student voice: How to enhance participation, citizenship, and leadership*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

- Brooks, J. G & Brooks, M. (1993). *The case for constructivist classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Deci, E. L. (1995). *Why we do what we do: Understanding self-motivation*. New York: Penquin Books.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: The Free Press.
- Erickson, H.L (2002). *Concept-based curriculum and instruction: Teaching beyond the facts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Fogarty, R. (1995). *Best practices for the learner-centered classroom*. Arlington Heights, Il: Skylight.
- Jensen, E. (1998). *Teaching with the brain in mind*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Maker, J. (1996). *Nurturing giftedness in young children*. Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.
- Nelson, J. (1996). *Positive discipline*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Northey, S. S. (2005). *Handbook on differentiated instruction for middle and high School*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Tomlinson, C. (1995). *How to differentiate instruction in the mixed ability classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- Waterman, S. (2006). *The democratic differentiated classroom*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.



About the author - Before coming to teaching, Sheryn Waterman was a psychotherapist specializing in marital and family therapy. She is currently a Literacy Coach and a doctoral candidate. She has written three books on teaching, has been teacher of the year in two schools, and recently renewed her National Board Certification.