Whose responsibility is it in Higher Education to develop undergraduate students' notion of democratic citizenship?

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Abstract

In an era of globalisation, nation states are under increasing pressure to shape sustainable societies and economies. As a result, governments continue to advocate for a reassessment of the role that universities can play in developing students who are able to demonstrate democratic citizenship by their application of democratic principles. This paper introduces the notion that although universities actively promote their ideals to students about raising their awareness of becoming ethical, socially and environmentally responsible citizens, clear leadership and guidelines regarding how to motivate students to incorporate and apply these ideals in their studies remains much more problematic for teaching staff.

This Case Study provides an in-depth analysis of how Third Space Theory has been applied to an Australian university context in order to develop two modes of instruction which have been designed to enhance first year students' competencies in democratic principles and citizenship. This paper concludes that despite the participants of this study encountering some success in raising awareness of these modes of instruction and their benefits to students, further institutional refinements need to occur before pedagogical approaches to develop democratic citizenship can be more widely taken up by Faculty and students. If this can be achieved, higher education providers are much more likely to influence how graduates exhibit their competencies in democratic engagement with others and the world around them.

Keywords: Democratic Education, Graduate Capabilities, Guided Inquiry, Debates

Introduction

This piece of action research casts a pedagogical lens on how higher education institutions can provide university students with a progressive education in areas related to democratic citizenship. We consider that a university's curriculum can be instrumental in this matter because students can be guided and supported by the curriculum in a way that fosters their personal growth as well as learning.

Like many universities around the world, the Australian university presented in this Case Study provides guidance to students and teaching staff by setting out some of the wider goals of receiving a higher education. Many university leaders are explicit about the ideology surrounding the types of capabilities they believe that students should develop while studying their degree subjects. For instance, Macquarie University (2015) sets out its ideals by stating:

> We want our graduates to have respect for diversity, to be open-minded, sensitive to others and inclusive, and to be open to other cultures and perspectives: they should have a level of cultural literacy. Our graduates should be aware of disadvantage and social justice, and be willing to participate to help create a wiser and better society.

While we appreciate the value of the University's descriptions regarding what it means to function as an engaged and ethical citizen, it is interesting to note that there isn't any mention of developing students' understanding of democratic citizenship or democratic principles. The University, does however, mention social justice. This indicates that the University considers it important for students to learn about the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges across global societies. It is worth pointing out that awareness, knowledge and understanding of social justice and injustice is not automatically learned by students enrolled in a degree course. So who teaches them about this and how are students being taught? Likewise students' awareness, knowledge and understanding of democratic citizenship need to be cultivated if they are to be adequately prepared to function effectively as engaged and ethical citizens. We argue that one of the main purposes of a higher education is to develop students' thinking, knowledge, attitudes and interpersonal skills in matters related to democratic citizenship, which we refer to collectively as democratic competency. This study is anchored in approaches to democratic citizenship as developed by Klemenčič (2008, p. 2), who argues that despite the concept of democratic citizenship being difficult to define, there does seem to be two useful notions which help to raise levels of consciousness in this area: 'knowing how to act and knowing how to be'. Knowing how to act entails students understanding the social and political structures that govern society whereas knowing how to be targets students' ability to engage and assess values underpinning society. Klemenčič (2008, p. 4) argues that for university students to successfully evolve into democratic citizens they need to develop civic competencies, that is, using interpersonal skills to enable their capabilities to interface effectively with members of society and public institutions. An additional component to democratic citizenship is to develop students' cognitive competencies, such as, their critical thinking by offering them regular opportunities to apply their own constructs of knowledge in problem-solving (Klemenčič, 2008, p.4). This approach to personal development aims to better equip students with competencies that enable them to fully engage in a democratic fashion with a wide spectrum of communities, organisations and corporations; and thereby increase their proficiency to be able to deliberate and sensitively debate extremely diverse and complex issues in local and global societies. Relying on the work of Bok (2008), Klemenčič also suggests that a crucial component of developing these specific types of cognitive competencies is to ensure that students become much more explicitly aware of the ethical and democratic dimensions of their professional and personal decisions. In doing so, they are likely to become more conscious of their own personal growth in areas related to ethical and democratic behaviours.

We argue that specific modes of instruction aimed at supporting students' self-development in democratic competency are absent from the University's undergraduate curriculum. To explore this further, this research study was set up in order to achieve a better understanding of how pedagogical approaches and techniques targeting self-development in democratic competency can be introduced and embedded into an undergraduate degree course. By presenting this Case Study, the authors wish to demonstrate that specific modes of instruction can be very effective at developing undergraduate students' competencies in democratic citizenship. We propose that the modes of instruction used in this study can foster students' motivation for personal growth in democratic competency, such as, discovering what it means to live as engaged and ethical local and global citizens. Moreover, this Case Study illustrates what can be achieved, when pedagogies designed specifically to enhance democratic competency are introduced into a large first year undergraduate course, and in doing so we have illustrated some ways to determine the effects these modes of instruction are having on students and teaching staff. Furthermore, this study adds contextual examples and insights which contribute to the growing body of research conducted on the theme of whose responsibility is it in Higher Education to educate university students, irrespective of their chosen degree, about democratic cultures, democratic citizenship, human rights and sustainability. To highlight the significance of this issue in higher education, The Council of Europe (2006, p.3)

announced a call for action that encourages all higher education providers and those students who study in them to:

1. 'become aware of their responsibilities as educated citizens, for the development of their societies, the values of democracy, human rights and social, environmental and economic sustainability; and,
2. take action in their local as well as in the national and global communities to put these principles into practice;
3. encourage education for democracy in the curriculum and all aspects of institutional life;
4. assume responsibility for the future of their universities and colleges'.

The next part of this paper presents the Case Study in detail, and demonstrates some of the specific aspects concerning how educational theory has been used to develop pedagogical approaches, techniques and modes of instruction to strengthen students' capabilities in democratic competency.

University Case Study - The Australian Context

This paper pays particular attention to the experiences that an academic member of staff and a learning and teaching specialist had when embedding modes of instruction targeting democratic competency within the context of a first year course in Human Resource Management. In 2012, the University added a program into the undergraduate curriculum which has been designed to increase undergraduate students' participation and engagement (PACE) in national and international organisations. This course is usually taken for credit as an elective in either a student's second or final year of their undergraduate degree. It can also be taken as a co-curricular course without credit. Each PACE course offers an academic framework which can include any of the following experiential components: work-integrated learning, practicum, field trip, group project for corporate business and community development projects and internships. It is widely acknowledged by the University community that PACE contributes to the University's popularity with students and this acknowledgement is backed up by annual national surveys, which demonstrate that Macquarie University has been rated as Australia's sixth most preferred university for recent school leavers (UAC, 2016). Since PACE was introduced, there has been a hive of interest among academics and teaching professionals concerning the practicalities of introducing and embedding pedagogies, which cultivate students' capabilities for when they graduate. One of the University's key pedagogical aims was to 'integrate graduate capabilities into the specific context of a discipline or program to ensure a major impact on teaching and learning' (Winchester-Seeto and Bosanquet, 2009, p. 510). As a result, the technique of embedding modes of instruction that served this aim was put higher up on the University's learning and teaching agenda. This was when the notion of embedding pedagogies that targeted the development of students' competencies and skills became popular at the University. To illustrate, in 2012 each Faculty was able to access the advisory services of a Learning Skills Advisor, who was initially tasked, on a part-time basis, to embed a variety of modes of instruction and resources targeting the development of students' competencies and skills during their undergraduate studies. Each advisor worked closely with Faculty members to introduce and embed pedagogical techniques that were specifically designed to develop and enhance the competencies and skills perceived to be of importance to each Faculty's cohort of students. The impetus for this action research study was initiated in 2012 when the Course Convenor for an undergraduate introductory course in Human Resources Management approached a Learning Skills Advisor to undertake a needs analysis of the range of academic literacy skills that students would need to satisfactorily complete the course. The results from the needs analysis showed that specific modes of instruction would need to be introduced and embedded into the course in order to encourage students to enhance their intellectual competencies in critical thinking, information literacy skills in secondary research and argument-building, such as: presenting, defending and modifying intellectual ideas and arguments. The following section of this article outlines the convergence between the theoretical use of Third Space Theory and the real-life application of the theory in this Case Study's educational setting and context.

Applying Third Space Theory to develop students' democratic competencies

To demonstrate how students' democratic competencies were developed during their studies on the management course, we present a Third Space Theory, which is considered by a growing number of researchers as an educational theory (Soya, 1996; Gutiérrez, 2008, Moje et al, 2004). Third Space Theory is a useful framework to describe in-between spaces, where the First and Second Spaces

overlap to generate a hybrid known as a Third Space. In this sense, the application of Third Space Theory in education explains the unique qualities and experiences each learner and teacher has as they move in and out of these in-between spaces. To illustrate, a Third Space can open up at the interstices of learners' everyday knowledges used in their First Space at home and the Second Space of academic knowledge typically encountered at school. Maniotes (2005) has conceptualised a Literary Third Space Theory whereby school pupils aged between 9 and 10 were supported by their teacher during their class discussions to include the First Space of personal knowledge as way to develop their own critical perspectives about the set literature from the Second Space of the examination syllabus. The result was that a hybrid Third Space was encountered which 'zeros in on the linking space between students' prior knowledge and their experiences and the information they seek and find' (Kuhlthau and Cole, 2012, p. 6). First and Second Spaces can be conceptualised as two different, and possibly conflicting, spatial groupings. To reduce conflict, the in-betweenness of a Third Space offers educators and learners the opportunity to interact physically, mentally and socially in a way that opens up the possibility for positive transformation.

For Becker and Couto (1996) the most effective way to teach democracy in any educational setting is to explicitly use teaching techniques which convincingly convey a sense of democracy with the class. This hints at the very real possibility that students need to perceive democratic principles being consistently applied around them if they are to benefit from these modes of instruction. Yet how can this goal be achieved when teaching a large student cohort? It is our view that Third Space Theory has proved to be an extremely useful mental construct to facilitate the process of introducing and embedding modes of instruction which motivate students to more fully engage with the concepts of democratic citizenship without being explicitly informed by their lecturers that they are doing this. In other words, a Third Learning Space needed to open up so that students and teachers could more easily realise the transformative potential of the hybridity between the First Space of students' personal knowledge systems and the Second Space of the University's curriculum and scholarly practices. The first specific mode of instruction that utilised Third Space Theory was introduced in 2013 whereby students enrolled on the course were required to complete a debating assessment. The debating activities introduced into the assessment schedule and tutorial program were drawn from the course literature in a way that highlighted the interaction between people, processes and institutions. The aims of the debating assessment were as follows:

- to expose students to some of the principles of democracy and democratic citizenship, such as, the freedom of speech and listening to people from different cultures, races, religions, and ethnic groups, so that they become more tolerant of and engaged with other people's points of view; additionally students were required to undertake peer assessments of each other's efforts during the debates in order to raise awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses as well as to provide informative feedback to each other about how to improve;
- to encourage students to create a Third Learning Space in which they are more able to contribute to each other's understanding of democratic principles and democratic citizenship. Students were actively encouraged by lecturers and tutors to utilise their prior First Space knowledges and experiences to help them direct the ways in which they seek, process and generate information so that they are better able to consider the greater issues relating to societies' systems, processes and institutions as well develop the ability to use Second Space scholarly research practices to build logical, persuasive arguments that address the course's major topics;
- for students to consider some of the ethical consequences of their decisions and argument making processes by encouraging them to shape the ways in which they contribute to each other's understanding of democratic citizenship. Lecturers and tutors encouraged students to frame their insights, perspectives and arguments by offering a critical perspective on the authors or scholars' ideas while also engaging with each other's views. We consider this aspect to be an essential part of any democratic process.

The Course Convenor was concerned that if students didn't receive sufficient learning support, they would find the debating assessment too challenging and they may not achieve their learning aims. Therefore, to ensure that students were more likely to achieve the aims linked to the debating assessment, the Course Convenor took a Third Space approach to introduce the second mode of instruction, which is referred to as Guided Inquiry. Kuhlthau, Maniotes and Caspari (2007) have provided a very useful model to describe how Guided Inquiry can be used by educators in their own educational contexts and settings. This model enabled the Course Convenor, lecturers and tutors to support and guide students through the newly introduced debating assessment regime. Of primary

importance in the Guided Inquiry mode of instruction is for students to develop the requisite digital information search skills to efficiently and effectively conduct secondary research investigations. The Course Convenor invited two of the Faculty's learning support specialists to work closely with the course's teaching staff and students to form a conceptual Third Learning Space in which students were encouraged, motivated and supported to become more confident at integrating their First Space real world experiences and findings with their Second Space curriculum and academic studies. The Learning Skills Advisor assisted the Course Convenor in designing student-centred assignment tasks which were supported by a variety of face-to-face and digital learning resources which were produced to suit a range of learning preferences. The Research Librarian demonstrated to students a wide variety of research tools that were available to them to conduct their research projects to a high standard.

By carrying out this research study, we considered we could gain a better understanding of how Third Space Theory could facilitate a greater understanding of how to develop students' competencies in democratic citizenship and democratic principles in a university setting. To achieve this, we performed our analysis on data collected from five subsequent semesters. Our data sets were generated from students' formal course evaluations (questionnaires), tutors and lecturers' informal feedback to the Course Convenor (student observations and focus groups) and the researchers' professional evaluations (semi-structured interviews and critical reflective narratives). Our initial findings have identified two distinct types of outcomes from introducing and embedding the debating and Guided Inquiry modes of instructions. The first group focuses on the positive outcomes (the enablers) relating to developing students' democratic competencies and the second group focuses on the negative outcomes (the inhibitors). Each group of findings is considered in turn.

Enablers:

1. Students considered that they had improved their self-awareness of their civic and cognitive competencies and gained a fuller understanding of the institutional processes and actors that influence the world of work in an Australian context;
2. Students have enjoyed exploring the course's key topics and concepts by taking part in the debates;
3. The integration of learning support services from the Research Librarian and Learning Skills Advisor offered students substantial opportunities to receive expert advice on how best to reach their learning outcomes;
4. Students appreciated how the lecturers were able to relate theoretical concepts to real world contexts which assisted students in the process of developing their own personal and unique constructs of the world;
5. The debates encouraged students and lecturers to create a Third Learning Space which helped them to learn how to make relevant and meaningful links between the current Second Space university curriculum and the future Second Space world of work. Many students commented on how much it helped them to better understand what it means to be a professional person in their chosen field.

Inhibitors:

1. Students require supplementary development in how to work more collaboratively in small groups;
2. Students require further development in two to three key stages of the digital information search processes deemed necessary to complete their assignments to a high standard.

In order to scale up the level of student participation in building awareness of democratic competence in this management course, the following operational decisions intend to be implemented in the next delivery of the course:

- Provide students with the opportunity to select and create a personalised learning activity which requires students to actively participate in deliberating the complexities and ethical consequences of their strategic choices when it comes to the design of work systems and interaction with other stakeholders in society, such as, government, law-makers and worker representatives;
- Embed exercises within the course design that target the 4 D's of democracy (diversity, dissent, deliberation and decision making) so as to improve the manner in which students conduct teamwork and enhance their collaboration skills (DDA, 2016). This should more effectively prepare students to explore projects/assignments in the course in a mature manner

while also encouraging students to develop their interpersonal capabilities as democratic citizens in a variety of local, regional, national and/or international contexts.

Conclusion

The researchers have perceived that the promotion of the value of democratic citizenship and its ideals serves to bring about greater levels of self-awareness of education for democracy among students and educators, particularly when one regards universities and colleges as exemplars of democratic institutions. In addition to this, we consider that if all students are to benefit from the University's educational ideologies concerning graduate capabilities then the University's undergraduate curriculum needs to be improved so that it explicitly contributes to the process in which teaching staff pursue these goals, perhaps, as seen in this Case Study, by providing academics with access to expert guidance and mentors. We propose that a Third Space approach to delivering the curriculum can also be used to provide support to teaching staff who are responsible for delivering the curriculum and are often tasked with the challenge of introducing and embedding new modes of instruction into their courses. In this Case Study, we learnt that not only did the learning support specialists provide guidance and encouragement to students but they also provided pedagogical support to lecturers and tutors.

Our research demonstrates that the application of Third Space Theory is a powerful way of ascertaining how undergraduate students' awareness of, and engagement with concepts, topics and issues relating to democratic citizenship can be stimulated in a higher education context. It was seen that by encouraging students to create their own perspectives and criticisms in a Third Learning Space, they were more able to connect together the concepts associated with democratic principles and citizenship, and also they actively practised the types of civic and cognitive competencies that are required to function as a dutiful and democratic citizen.

This Case Study has helped to identify some of the initiatives that Faculty members have utilised to promote and enhance students' awareness of democratic citizenship and the competencies that are typically associated with receiving a higher education. It is necessary to point out the fundamental importance each educator's ideologies play when deciding how best to equip students with democratic competencies. This is because of the variability of ideals which may differ slightly or even considerably from person-to-person and country-to-country. However, regardless of the differences and similarities between individuals' democratic ideologies, a unifying perspective of this is to remember that the main purpose of developing democratic competencies in undergraduate students is to give them the confidence to use democratic principles, as a core foundation, to question wisely, to vocalise their concerns ethically, and to attempt to evaluate and refine the communities, institutions and people around them in order to build and sustain democratic cultures. Surely, this is every democratic citizen's responsibility.

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