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Democratic Education: A Basic Approach

Kenneth B. Kaiser

*Western Michigan University*

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Our educational system extending from Kindergarten through the Doctoral degree has always been recognized as the foundation upon which our democratic society rests. Its task has been to consummate the preparation of the individual for life in this complex society as a self-directing citizen. This task involves much more than the inculcation of knowledge in individuals: an adult in a democracy like ours must be capable of responsible, self-initiated action and intelligent decision-making; he must be able to make flexible, intelligent adaptations to various problems that will confront him. Our society confers upon an individual simultaneously the tremendous benefits and the tremendous responsibilities of freedom. It is the job of our educational system to help prepare persons to reap the benefits and handle the responsibilities of freedom.

It would seem self-evident therefore that the interior of our educational system must approximate as nearly as possible the exterior world into which the adult must step when he leaves the system. The art of democratic living is obviously an art that can only be learned through practice. Therefore the classroom should be a place in which democracy is practiced at its best, if it is to provide the best sort of democratic education.

Lest there be misunderstanding let it be added that this is not to suggest that the classroom should abandon the traditional pursuit of knowledge, but rather that knowledge should be pursued within the highest type of democratic atmosphere possible.

If this be admitted then the question becomes one of how to go about instituting this sort of atmosphere—if we do not already have it in the contemporary form of our educational system.

So let us examine the atmosphere that generally prevails in American educational institutions to ascertain how democratic it is. In the
typical classroom we find that the teacher is virtually the sole determinant of the course taken by the educational process; he lectures, gives assignments, conducts sessions in which he answers student questions about his lecture topics or his assignments, conducts discussions in which he plays a dominating role, and finally administers exams so that he may evaluate the students.

This is decidedly not a practice field for democratic living. Rather than a democratic atmosphere this must be considered an authoritarian one. Instead of developing self-direction and self-initiative and independence in thought and action on the part of the student, there seems to be developed obedience and dependence. This is definitely not the type of education to provide the optimum preparation for living in our democratic society.

Since the present form of education does not provide the democratic atmosphere needed to most effectively prepare our students for the freedom and responsibility of an adult in our society, we must turn elsewhere for a form of education that can provide us with the highest type of democratic atmosphere, or at least with an atmosphere that is decidedly democratic rather than the markedly authoritarian one now prevailing in our country.

There apparently is at least a tentative solution to our problem in the development of a radically new orientation to education, known as "nondirective teaching." This type is definitely organized along democratic lines. It replaces "uni-sovereignty" with universal sovereignty; i.e. the students have a prominent voice in the educational process. Thus this approach is based upon a profound faith and trust in the innate potentialities of the student for directing himself. This faith and trust is a manifestation of the recognition of a fundamental educational truth, which has been stated effectively by Alfred North Whitehead:

... our pupils are alive, and cannot be chopped into separate bits, like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. In the production of a mechanism the constructive energy lies outside it, and adds discrete parts to discrete parts. The case is far different for a living organism which grows by its own impulse towards self-development. This impulse can be stimulated and guided from outside the organism, and it can also be killed. But for all your stimulation and guidance the creative impulse towards growth comes from within, and is intensely characteristic of the individual.¹

Now let us consider more specifically the nature of this educational orientation. The first and primary task of the instructor is to develop an acceptant climate in the classroom—a climate free of any threat to the student. The instructor accomplishes this by displaying respect for the worth and capacity of the student, evincing an understanding and acceptance of the individual as he presently is, and by the avoidance of any evaluation of the student's actions, within clearly defined limits.

“Within clearly defined limits” leads directly into a most important point concerning “nondirective teaching.” Using this approach does not necessarily mean that the student is in complete control of the educational situation or that he is free to do anything: the instructor still may impose limitations on the conduct in the classroom and he still may play a prominent part in the direction the course takes. This orientation has two distinguishing features: first the student is allowed to play a prominent role in his own educational process, and secondly that while the school and the teacher may place certain limitations upon the scope of the student's freedom and self-direction, these limitations will be relatively broad and clearly defined. The important factor is not that there are limitations, but rather the attitude, the permissiveness, the freedom which exists within the limitations.

Thus it should be evident that this orientation entails no “Procrustean Bed” into which every teacher and group of students and subject must fit. Rather it is as has been suggested a basic approach to education which can be adapted to varying teacher and student personalities and areas of study.

But let us examine further the implications of this orientation for the classroom. It should be noted first that cooperation between the student and the teacher—rather than student obedience of the teacher's edicts—now becomes the general rule. The teacher will plan the course with the students rather than for them. This does not mean that the teacher's superior experience and knowledge in the area of the course will not count in the determination of the course's direction, but rather that it will be supplemented by a consideration of the students' interests and motivations in the area. This would seem to not only serve democratic purposes but also to enhance the chances of success in terms of subject matter alone (which of course also has a bearing on an individual's life in a democracy).

Secondly there is effected a radical transformation of the classroom's learning techniques. No longer are there lectures, question and
answer periods, teacher-dominated discussions, and grade-determining examinations dominating the educational scene. Perhaps they will still be present to a limited extent since the students may request them some of the time or the instructor may feel that some lectures should be given to provide new material for the class to work with, or the school may require an examination for course credits. But the old procedures will play a decidedly subsidiary role with the advent of "nondirective teaching." Furthermore it should be noted that a lecture requested by the students or agreed upon by the students is quite a different thing than one imposed upon the students by the teacher.

Instead the dominant procedure will be the student-dominated discussions in which the teacher is just another individual whose opinion should be considered for what it is worth, but not accepted as true unless the student feels it merits this acceptance. Now the students will have to grapple with the problems of the course themselves: the teacher-expert with the gratuitous answers to the questions raised by the course will be a thing of the past (this does not preclude the teacher's making available for the class his vast fund of knowledge in the area of the course). The students own understanding and creativity will be the dominant factors in the educational process.

However the elevation of the student to primacy does not mean that the instructor will become a passive factor in the educational process. Rather it signifies a change in the nature of the instructor's activity. His purpose now is to be accessible to the students for their use of him in a professional manner—not to dominate the students. He will give the students the benefit of his superior knowledge and experience by raising questions and offering suggestions, rather than by giving answers and edicts. For example the teacher can oppose the fixed notions, hasty generalizations or superficial conclusions of the students. An effective statement of the instructor's new role is proffered by Dr. Nathaniel Cantor, Head of the University of Buffalo's Anthropology and Sociology Department:

The instructor's contribution includes not only knowledge of the specific subject-matter but an understanding of the learning process. He must watch what he says, and how he says it; he must understand when he should speak, and to whom. The activity of the instructor is a dynamic whole whose focus shifts as different problems emerge.

From this brief exposition of the nature of "non-directive teaching," let us turn to the consequences of this new orientation towards education. From observations made by instructors who have adopted

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this basic approach to teaching and their students and a limited number of research investigations and experiments several noteworthy conclusions have emerged.

One obvious outcome stemming from the adoption of this "non-directive" orientation is the greatly increased amount of classroom participation by the students. An experiment by Volney Faw at Lewis and Clark College demonstrated that student-centered or "nondirective" groups make from two to three times as many statements as the conventional classroom groups. Furthermore over the duration of the meetings of the "nondirective" group less than 1/10 of the students failed to participate. This certainly seems to point in the direction of the goals of a democratic education.

Secondly, student-centered discussions are much more personalized than those in the conventional classroom. Students in this "nondirective" environment tend to express personal feelings and experiences in relation to the subject of discussion while the conventional groups seem to discuss for the most part discussion issues in a purely intellectual manner, with fewer references to their own experiences. This would seem to imply that the learning in the student-centered classes tends to be more meaningful to the individual. The importance of this for democratic education is self-evident.

A third positive consequence of this new approach is that it apparently fosters growth in self-understanding or self-insight on the part of students to a greater extent than the conventional approach. Not only have teachers and students observed this outcome, but also a preliminary study by Llewellyn Gross of one of Dr. Cantor's classes in relation to the "non-nondirective" type class indicates this. Assuredly this is a most significant result as concerns preparing students for life in a democracy in which they must manage their own lives.

A fourth favorable trend in "nondirective" education is that most students have a tendency to work more diligently and at a more profound level than in the ordinary sort of course. The explanation seems to be that students feel greater responsibility for their work and therefore are more active and feel a greater need to pursue course materials to resolve important problems raised in the discussions. Probably another reason is that because students have a larger voice in determining educational goals they accept the goals to a greater extent. Again this obviously furthers democratic aims.

Another trend favoring democratic ends is that students tend to feel at the end of a course based on this approach that their learning has only begun—not ended as is often the result in classes under other orientations. This is due mainly to the fact that the students themselves have had to grapple with the issues of the courses, and they therefore realize how incomplete is their understanding of the questions and how tentative the answers are. In the conventional course the authoritative answers often given by instructors tend to have a fixity which is an obstacle to further learning.

Also, adoption of the student-centered orientation apparently does not entail a decline in the amount of information gained by the students. Faw administered three objective-type examinations to both the student-centered and non-student-centered groups. The general aptitudes of both student groups were approximately equal, although the conventional group had a slightly higher mean grade point average in all other class work at the college. Yet despite this grade average deficit and the laws of chance and probability, the students under this "nondirective" approach scored approximately two percentage points higher on the average on each of the three examinations. The explanation was that the "nondirective" discussions brought out a wealth of authentic facts and information which often were as comprehensive and much more interestingly presented than if the instructor had made the presentation. So apparently there will be no decline in factual knowledge if this approach is adopted.

Finally the courses based on this orientation seem to make a difference in the life of the student—not merely in the intellectual symbols he manipulates. What is learned in the classrooms seems to carry over into the life and activities outside of the classroom to a much greater extent than happens in the conventional course. Dr. Cantor supplies this illuminating comment written by one of his students:

Another very important part of this course is that it is taught in such a manner that I feel I can apply it in my everyday life. By this, I do not only mean those instances in which I would have some connection with the field of criminology, but the principles are made known to me in such a way as to be applicable to things I do every day. I can honestly say that this is the only course I have taken in my university career that is so living for me. There is no doubt in my mind that the reason for this is that it is not taught to the students, rather, they do the teaching themselves. The facts are gathered by an actual struggle with them and not by a question-and-answer method. This makes evident the fact that a stu-
dent can get as much or as little out of the course as he puts into it. This seems to me a very intelligent way to present material, for when, if not now, are we ever going to learn? The Criminology Class is merely a cross-section of life’s experience.  

It is the pervasive influence of this educational experience which is so akin to that of life after the school books are put away that constitutes the most significant of all the reasons for adopting the “non-directive” orientation in a democratic educational system. It seems self-evident that a youth’s educational experiences should approximate as fully as possible the experiences of an adult in his society, so that when he becomes an adult he will be as well prepared as possible to adapt successfully to the conditions of adult life. It would seem obvious that otherwise one would be unduly handicapped when he is thrust into society on his own, to the detriment of both him and society. 

The above outcomes of “nondirective” education are of course not true of every student, but it does appear thus far that all but a small minority have attitudes towards it more favorable than unfavorable. But it must be admitted that frequently some students feel a course conducted in this manner is of no benefit to them. However, since this adverse reaction is necessarily true of any educational orientation it seems that the emphasis should be placed on the positive results realized by the vast majority of students. Moreover if the conventional orientation is not conducive to the satisfactory realization of democratic goals, then it would seem that in a real sense we would fail in the education of those who would react negatively to the “nondirective” approach even if we were to give them the conventional type education.

It seems reasonable to conclude on the basis of the observations and research investigations thus far made and on the basis of the a priori reasonableness of the argument that one can only become prepared to live as an adult in a democracy through practice or engagement in adult-like experiences, that our democratic educational system should seriously consider the adoption of a new basic orientation that seems to be better geared to the needs of a democratic society than the present orientation—the “nondirective” approach.

5 Cantor, p. 257.
6 In addition to the sources listed in my footnotes I am much indebted to Carl Rogers’ Client-Centered Therapy (Boston, 1951).
After looking over this issue and all the old issues of *CALLIOPE* and its predecessors, *THE WESTERN HERALD* supplement and *THE HERALD AND THE HORN*, I discovered an encouraging element in most of the work. College writers, (and all too often in college publications), are apt to write directly from the shallow depths of their suddenly sensitive but immature emotions. Western's publications, however, have managed to maintain a certain quality overcoming this tendency. Always there has been in our literary magazine a content of thought that reveals the writers' perception of their world (not imaginary worlds that they could never have experienced). Furthermore, they have often written into their works sharp criticism or analysis of that world.

Of course, *CALLIOPE* has been plagued by its share of emotional and undeveloped stories, "toilet imagery" and tired clichés in its poetry. But the magazine has always included works that have this unique element of perception, sometimes well expressed, sometimes only partially (as is natural with college writers who are essentially beginners).

With the wider use of non-fiction in the Spring, 1958 issue, *CALLIOPE* took a decisive step towards being an even stronger expression of the ideas of Western's students.

This Spring's issue includes two essays on the desirability of completeness in art (starting, as is natural in a literary magazine, with literary subjects) and a piece on democratic education, a topic of primary importance to Western students and faculty.

*CALLIOPE* is "coming of age," just as Western is as a university. Its development is continuous, and dependent upon its contributors and staff. Its growth is further indicated by the buyer response and Student Council aid that has provided enough money for fine art work and better format.

As editor, it is not being presumptuous, I hope, to say that I am quietly proud of this issue. Against all criticism I can say that here is a gathering of stories, essays, and poems written not only from emotion, or even an unnamed generative force that is responsible for the initial creation, but also from the mind. Our writers have not tried to reveal in crude terms their "soul," traumas, or id processes for the sake of effectiveness.

Sometimes we stumble in our expression, for we are inexperienced. Sometimes we are profane for the sake of art. Sometimes we write too much for a statement that is much too small. But we will become articulate; we will not sacrifice art for the sake of profanity; and in the spirit of the creation which we perceive as life, we will grow.

R. B. H.