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Democratic Teaching in BYU's American Heritage Course: Teaching Citizenship While Improving Learning

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Democratic teaching is a topic that is popular among educators. What it essentially means is that students are given opportunities to choose how and possibly what they learn. A major concern in the social sciences is how well schools and universities are preparing students to become responsible and contributing citizens. Dr. J. Gary Daynes and his staff considered these two issues, democratic education and teaching citizenship in designing the curriculum and teaching methods of an experimental section of American Heritage at BYU in the Winter Semester of 2000.

This section used democratic principles of teaching. Students chose to be in this section and were given the option of taking another section. They also were allowed to choose which learning model they used. In order to incorporate citizenship development, the learning models reflected two models of citizenship activist and informed citizen. Both models incorporated hands-on, experiential learning. Debates and class discussions were the order of the day. However, depending on the model used, students approached class differently. Those in the activist group based their opinions and arguments on personal experience and preconceived ideas. Those in the informed citizen group were given information, allowed to weigh it and discuss it, and then form an opinion based on this information. These models, along with the measures used to evaluate citizenship development, came from Michael Schudson's *The Good Citizen*.

To evaluate citizenship and democratic attitudes, students completed a pre-course survey in the second week of the course and a post-course survey the last week of the course. Nine sections of American Heritage served as the control group. Each of these was taught in a traditional/lecture-style classroom. Section five served as the experimental section and was taught democratically, complete with the learning models of citizenship. The survey incorporated several measures of citizenship: voter turnout, likeliness of voting, trust in major institutions, participation in voluntary organizations, attitudes about economic and social mobility, and ideas about civic rights and responsibilities.

My main task was to evaluate the pre and post surveys, mark changes in student responses throughout the semester, and determine if democratic teaching made a significant difference in both learning and citizenship in the students of section five. This also meant reviewing and comparing students' grades, sending out and assessing a follow-up survey, and writing about my findings for possible publication in a professional journal.

My hypothesis in approaching this venture was that democratic teaching would make a difference in how well students learned and my hope was that it would also increase their views of citizenship. I was not disappointed. Students' grades from section five were every bit as high as those of students from the control sections. What's more, the standard deviation of points scored in section five was significantly lower than in the control sections, suggesting that section

five was successful at reaching all students much more effectively than the other, more traditionally taught sections. Further, the lowest score from section five was nearly double that of the next highest low score from the control groups. Such objective measures of learning certainly are in favor of democratic teaching. Student responses through surveys and in-class writing assignments support these findings. Students were pleased that they were able to choose their own style of learning and found that they were comfortable and involved in this course because they were allowed this choice.

The findings about citizenship were also encouraging. Students in section five became more aware of democratic and political issues and especially, of their opinions regarding these. When compared with the survey results of the control group, the results from the experimental section changed more than those of the control group. As part of the experiment, students were encouraged to be involved in voluntary organizations. This gave them practical experience and helped them to see the important role of an individual. According to the criteria used, students in section five developed better citizenship than those in the control sections.

This work was not without its frustrations. The largest obstacle I dealt with was in determining how statistically significant the survey findings were. I have never learned about statistics, and I spent a lot of time trying to learn about them. I found that some work should have been done before the surveys were even administered (i.e. the optimal statistical significance should have been determined). Nevertheless, I was able to learn some about statistics, and I learned how to use a computer program to help me in determining significance. The experience will aid me in future research projects.

Overall, this was an invaluable learning experience for me. I have just graduated and am beginning my first year as a teacher. Among the classes I will teach are a U.S. History class and a U.S. government class. I plan to implement the findings from my research in establishing a democratic classroom in which citizenship is fostered.