
Democracy & Education

Crafting Democratic Classrooms.

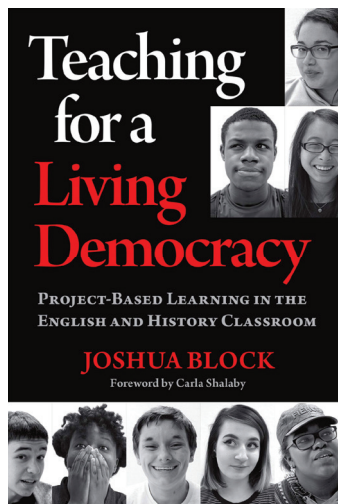
A Book Review of *Teaching for a Living Democracy: Project-based Learning in the English and History Classroom*

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LEIGH PATEL (2016) has noted that for those of us invested in the emancipatory possibilities of education, “places of formal schooling present an almost constant mixture of promise and heartbreak” (p. 397). Learning can be a transformative experience: It “involves departing from known automatic practices, venturing into experiences that aren’t wholly predictable, and experiencing temporary, productive failure” (p. 397). But schools often neglect this version of learning, pressured to adopt corporate curriculum to prepare students for high-stakes standardized tests (Apple, 2000; Au, 2016). Meanwhile, many practical guides for teachers emphasize universal “best practices,” reducing teaching to a series of “evidence-based” techniques (Biesta, 2007).

Teaching for a Living Democracy: Project-based Learning in the English and History Classroom, by long-time educator Joshua Block, refuses to diminish the complicated work of teaching and learning or to suggest that either is technocratic. Although Block provides a framework for teaching and specifically focuses on project-based learning, he “does not prescribe specific formulations or tricks,” recognizing that classroom contexts vary and that teachers—the book’s primary audience—will need to individualize and adapt his framework (Block, p. 11). As Carla Shalaby notes in book’s foreword, “This is a book that never says, ‘Do it this way; it’s perfect,’ but instead says, ‘Here’s what I tried. What do you think you might try?’” (Block, p. x).

What Block (2020) tries, in his classroom, is to engage his students in *living democracy*, “a complex, constantly evolving



practice that should be understood as a process of individual and collective engagement and transformation for both students and teachers” (p. 4). His conception of democracy is situated in the tradition of thinkers such as John Dewey, Saul Alinsky, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Maxine Greene. Democratic education, for Block, is participatory, imaginative, and transformative, a process that changes not only students and teachers but also what Tyack and Cuban (1995)

call the traditionally stultifying “grammar of schooling” (quoted in Block, 2020, p. 6).

Block (2020) organizes the book around a series of themes—designing curriculum, elevating student voices, envisioning new roles for teachers, and decolonizing schools—each one anchored by narrative descriptions of his work with students that showcase his philosophy of democratic participation. Block views “students as creators” and situates his work in terms of what he does to “support acts of creation” (p. 52). In his classroom, young people’s realities are taken up as

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curricular material; equally important, young people are respected for the ways in which they can and do make meaning out of their experiences (Caraballo et al., 2017; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Much of Block's project-based classroom is centered around student choice: Students have a range of options in terms of both the particular questions they pursue and the modalities through which they present their learning.

Block's (2020) framing of choice is distinct from constructions of "personalized learning" that increasingly appear in technocratic educational discourse (Roberts-Mahoney & Garrison, 2015). Although he does not directly critique neoliberal ideas of education that position learners as individual agents whose sole aim is to "master" content and skills (Clark, 2011; Sonu, 2018), Block refuses this reductionist approach. Instead, he works with students to create a cohesive classroom community, one in which "students know that they can be honest and that they will be heard," not only by their teacher but by one another (p. 63). Although Block centers student work as the primary products of their time together, it is clear from his descriptions that the classroom community, itself, is also a work of art that students and teacher cocreate throughout the school year.

Centering students means that Block's (2020) "most important task is to get out of the way" (p. 63)—to step back and let students struggle through confusion, think through problems, and create authentic and meaningful products. However, far from de-professionalizing the teacher (an increasing trend in neoliberal educational discourse—for an overview, see Milner, 2013), a living democracy requires extensive planning on the part of the teacher, who is simultaneously a researcher, consultant, facilitator, and collaborator.

At the same time, Block's (2020) careful planning is never presented as resulting in a class that runs perfectly. Block is unafraid to confront the messy realities of life in the classroom: The *livingness* of democracy is too important to him. In Block's classrooms, students sometimes put their heads down, misuse technology, argue among themselves, and fail to do their homework. Sometimes, students and their families object to the material he includes in the curriculum (as was the case when he shared a podcast featuring transgender children). He is honest about the constraints of his work in Philadelphia, an under-resourced urban school district. These nods to the realities of schooling matter: Block doesn't only value the lived experiences of his students. He recognizes that his knowledge arises not from any discrete set of skills but from the messy and complicated experiences through which his own understanding of teaching and learning has accumulated.

Block (2020) likewise draws on his own experiences in the chapter "Decolonizing School." He discusses the work that has been done in New Zealand, which he visited on a Fulbright Scholarship, to honor Māori culture and history. His trip later inspired him to invite his own students to create field notes about their hometown. However, in a chapter about the colonial and racist legacies of schooling—in which Block acknowledges that "for many students, the experience of school is a series of lessons about the necessity of submerging their primary identities and

cultures in order to succeed academically" (p. 78)—the absence of references to the legacy of culturally relevant theories of education (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Love, 2019; Paris & Alim, 2017) feels like a missed opportunity. How do these scholars complicate and expand our understandings of democracy in schools? Likewise, youth activism within and beyond schools has a long history (Camarota & Fine, 2010; Ginwright et al., 2006), especially in Philadelphia (Conner et al., 2013; Dzurinko et al., 2011). How does Block support his students to act as civic participants within the school and in their larger communities? How can and do his students effect change?

Ultimately, however, this book serves as an important framework for teachers who are interested in enacting a living democracy within their 21st-century classrooms. In a time when standardized tests are increasingly critiqued by teachers, students, families, and communities (Mitra et al., 2016; Schroeder et al., 2016), Block's work offers an important alternative to such emaciated yardsticks of "learning." Indeed, by showing us what is possible in a classroom, he provides us with more than a model: He gives us *hope*, an animating force in any democracy (Stitzlein, 2020).

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