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 Alinksy, 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 co-create throughout the school year.

Centring 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: The democratic deficit in educational research. Educational Theory, 57(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.17757/0895904815614916


