9

The Role of Exploratory Practice and International Collaboration in the University Classroom: A Guide to Fostering Students' Democratic Competences

Rhian Webb and Troy Sarina

Introduction

This chapter describes why and how the fusion of pedagogical knowledge, expertise and shared practice enabled two educators, one working at an Australian university and the other working at a Turkish university, to create opportunities to activate, guide and strengthen learners' democratic participation and competences in the university classroom. We align ourselves with Gerrevall's (2002) view that democratic competence

R. Webb (✉)
School of Foreign Languages, Middle East Technical University – Northern Cyprus Campus, Güzelyurt, Turkey
e-mail: rhian@metu.edu.tr

T. Sarina
Department of Marketing and Management, Faculty of Business and Economics, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW, Australia
e-mail: troy.sarina@mq.edu.au

K. Dikilitaş, J. Hanks (eds.), *Developing Language Teachers with Exploratory Practice*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75735-3_9

utilises people's communication to examine their own assumptions. Democratic competences, then, are those which specifically demonstrate learners' knowledge(s), critical understanding(s), skills, values and attitudes towards fulfilling active citizenship in democratic cultures. Both of us wanted to deepen our understanding of how educators can encourage education for democracy by promoting democratic participation in our university tutorials. We agreed that we wanted to take a more hands-on pedagogical approach to our research investigation. Exploratory Practice (EP) seemed a suitable way for us to attempt this.

Our intention was to add an exploratory dimension to our research. The nature of EP means that it specifically targets increasing teachers' and learners' understandings of their lives while in their educational settings and predominantly in classrooms (Allwright, 2003; Allwright & Hanks, 2009). EP takes a practical approach to research by proposing that meaningful research can be conducted during class time, which helps to safeguard against burn-out. Additionally, learners are encouraged to actively participate in EP. The involvement of learners as practitioner-researchers means that the teacher is relieved from the role of sole researcher. It also ensures that learners have opportunities to explore and understand their own learning agendas because EP places great emphasis on discovering "empathetic" understandings (Allwright, 2015, p. 25), many of which would not be explored or discovered if teachers did research purely *on* their learners without also incorporating some of the aspects their learners wished to better understand for themselves. In this sense, EP offers educators a refreshing approach to conducting their research by offering robust ways in which they can become familiar with learner-based research. In this chapter, we elaborate on how our collaboration developed throughout our EP work. In providing this analysis, the nature and value of EP is examined.

Engaging in Exploratory Practice—Identifying an Appropriate form to Understand Our Puzzles

We first came across EP in 2015 when Rhian attended some professional development training at the Turkish University in Northern Cyprus on how to conduct EP in a university classroom setting. After informing

Troy about what she had learned during the EP training, we both agreed that EP seemed to offer us a way forward to explore our respective puzzles. Applying EP encouraged us to use our imaginations and creative abilities to visualise what we wanted to explore and experiment with. Also, the EP facilitators encouraged us to move beyond the question of 'how' and instead consider the 'why'. We both wanted to explore why we felt it was important for our learners to activate their sense of democratic participation while studying at university and we intended to develop some of their core democratic competences in the process of teaching them our respective subjects. It wasn't long before we realised that in order to better understand this, we would need to create a "democratic space" in the university classroom in order to go deeper into our own understandings of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2016).

Additionally, we wanted to explore how our students would react to a newly formed 'democratic space' in their tutorials. It was from this realisation that our joint puzzles emerged:

How can a 'democratic space' be created in the university classroom?
Why might this space activate students' democratic competences?

Troy's Puzzle

As a senior lecturer and course convenor for a human resources management course at the Australian University, my interest in developing undergraduates' democratic competences began with a project to make commerce students more 'business ready'. I found myself confronted with the question: *"how can I help students to better understand the institutions that influence work practices?"* I wanted students to not only be 'business ready' but also to understand the importance of critiquing the institutions in society so that they could become more civic and engaged citizens. As I will explain below, I was experimenting with inquiry-based learning (Healey, 2005) as a mode of instruction which can be used to increase learners' involvement and participation in active learning. Through conducting their own inquiries, they are asked to investigate new ways to construct and apply their knowledge. Ironically, without

being aware of EP at the outset, I wanted to devise systems of learning that would help develop these types of attributes while also encouraging students to share their understandings of institutions in society that shape 'the world of work'. Additionally, I wanted students to develop a deeper awareness of how democratic principles influence the way in which institutions operate. It became apparent to me that I would need to create opportunities for students to actively learn how to identify these democratic principles as well as identify and reflect on the competences they could use to uphold them. EP might provide these opportunities.

Rhian's Puzzle

I had worked as a learning advisor on the Human Resources course that Troy had convened. After I left the Australian University to take up a position at the School of Foreign Languages at the Turkish University in Northern Cyprus, I kept in touch with Troy. We often discussed how his learners were progressing in his course, and I was keen to learn how the integration of inquiry-based learning had been helping him to prepare his students for life after university.

In my own job, I was teaching an introductory program for English as a Foreign Language to students who were required to develop their English language skills in order to take up their places in their departments. This is because the language of instruction at the Turkish University is predominantly in English. The program was heavily focused on exam preparation and I began to feel disheartened about it, mainly because I believed that I wasn't doing much to develop my students for 'real life' situations. After a year of teaching in the program, I realised that the students for whom I was responsible knew very little about the types of skills, attributes or competences they would need to successfully find employment after graduation. As my learners were young adults with their own academic and professional interests, I wanted to help them explore topics that interested them and also to nudge open the program so that they could discuss these topics during lessons with their classmates.

I started to think about the activities I could introduce into my lessons which would provide my learners with opportunities to develop their

personal knowledge and competences. I wasn't sure how I was going to intervene, particularly when the program's aims were so heavily geared to preparing students for their forthcoming English proficiency exam, held at the end of the academic year.

After attending the workshop on EP, I felt that EP seemed to offer a way forward to explore my puzzle, together with Troy. Using EP to mull over our puzzles encouraged us to use our imaginations and creative abilities. The workshop activities had encouraged us to move beyond the question of 'how' to probe more deeply, by asking 'why'. We both wanted to explore why we felt it was important for our learners to activate their sense of democratic participation and develop some core democratic competences.

Discovering Exploratory Practice

The nature of EP means that it specifically targets increasing teachers' and learners' understandings of their lives while in their educational settings and predominantly in classrooms (Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Hanks, 2015). EP takes a practical approach by proposing that meaningful research can be conducted during class time. Additionally, learners are encouraged to actively participate as co-researchers (Allwright, 2003). EP emphasises the understandings of all participants (Allwright, 2015; Hanks, 2015), arguing that if teachers purely did research *on* their learners, without also consulting them as equals, the overall findings would be incomplete. EP offers robust ways in which research deepens understandings, addresses all the stakeholders' understandings, and uses class time in a productive way. This egalitarian approach is linked to our stance on democratic participation.

Discovering Democratic Competences

Around the same time we started our EP study, the Council of Europe announced a pilot program seeking to test the development of a model of democratic competences, which was published in March 2016. The

model, which is available online, has been developed in order to support The Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (Council of Europe, 2010).

Democratic competences focus on an individual's attributes and behaviours, such as a person's positive interaction with others and ensuring that individuals are treated equally by each other as well as the institutions that govern society (Council of Europe, 2016, p. 6). In this fashion, learners' democratic competences can be mobilised "in an active and adaptive manner in order to respond to new circumstances" (Council of Europe, 2016, p. 6). Contemporary new circumstances include worrying challenges, such as rising levels of hate crime, increasing support for violent extremism and a general level of people's distrust of politicians and apathy regarding voting in elections. According to Becker and Couto (1996), one of the most effective ways to teach learners about democracy and how to be democratic is to incorporate learning and teaching approaches which convincingly activate educators' and learners' sense of democratic participation in the classroom. The model provides educators with a comprehensive list of 20 democratic competences, which are divided into five key areas (Council of Europe, 2016, p. 7):

- Attitudes;
- Knowledge;
- Critical understandings;
- Skills; and
- Values.

The publication sets out a number of 'can do' statements for learners. For instance, *attitude* can be evidenced when a learner 'interacts positively without certainty of what the other thinks and feels'; *knowledge and critical understanding* can be demonstrated when a learner 'uses evidence to support his/her opinions'; and *values* can be perceived when a learner 'expresses the view that all citizens should be treated equally and impartially under the law'. After discussing the appropriateness of the democratic competence model, we were confident that we were on the right track regarding the types of democratic competences that we could help our learners to develop. This information had a real bearing on how we

planned, devised and implemented our EP. Also, the literature we reviewed (Bîrzéa, 2000; Duerr, Spajic-Vrkaš, & Martins, 2000) helped us develop a greater sense of connectedness to the work that has been carried out by the plethora of organisations and individuals supporting the Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education.

Third Space Theory

In order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the 'building blocks' we would need in the classroom to develop students' democratic competences, we applied the educational theory known as third space theory. Third space theory (see Tracey & Morrow, 2012) proposes that learners' personal knowledges, discourses and experiences are situated in their 'First spaces'—which are mainly comprised of learners' family members, relatives and friends typically situated within the learners' home lives, friendship groups and communities. Third space theory explains how learners' 'First spaces' can be said to integrate with their 'Second spaces'—these are predominantly situated within tangible spaces in schools, colleges, universities and intangible educational spaces, such as degree programs and university curricula. 'Third spaces' are formed at the merging point between learners' 'First and Second spaces' in which learners and educators can figuratively 'step into' a newly formed 'Third space.' Here they can collectively work together to co-construct their own unique knowledges, discourses and experiences of disciplines, fields, subjects and/or topics covered in 'Second space' educational institutions and curricula (Moje et al., 2004).

The third space theory provided us was a conceptual framework, which helped us to understand how we could merge educators' and learners' 'First and Second spaces' to create a new 'Democratic space' within the university classroom. We started to visualise what a 'Democratic space' might look, feel and sound like in its tangible physical form. We visualised a learning and teaching space in which deeper understandings of topics and subjects could spring from the university curricula covered during tutorials and yet also be in step with the notion of fostering a

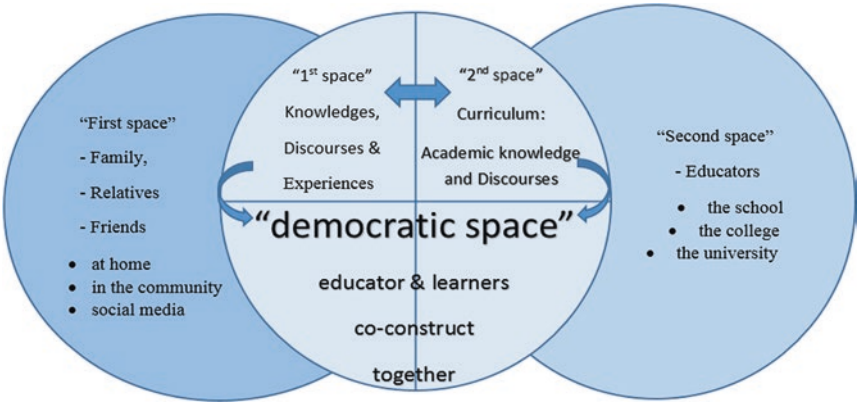


Fig. 9.1 Convergence model for creating democratic spaces

democratic approach between learners and educators and where 'new' understandings could be co-created. This linked directly with what we understood from EP.

Taking a didactic view of this, we identified the activity of debating as an effective tool for learners to reflect on their understandings of democratic influences in societies and share their views, beliefs and understandings of these influences with each other. Figure 9.1 shows the building blocks of co-creating a 'Democratic space' in the university classroom.

Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities

EP provided a research framework which pays close attention to the following: firstly, EP practitioners should consider how the research investigation uses class time in a productive way (Allwright, 2015). These are essential aspects to bear in mind when conducting a research study, particularly when one is feeling overwhelmed with administrative duties that seem to detract from extending practitioners' understandings of teaching and learning practices. Educators generally don't have the time nor the resources at their disposal to develop and implement their research investigations. This is exactly why the notion of incorporating a potentially

exploitable pedagogic/professional activity (PEPA) or a potentially exploitable reflective activity (PERA) during class time is so valuable for teachers and learners alike. A PEPA or a PERA (Miller & Cunha, 2016) is the type of learning and teaching activity that is usually conducted in class time, yet these activities are slightly modified or adapted in order to capture more information or data. These are incredibly useful research tools, as they can be oriented towards helping learners and teachers assume a knowledge producer role as well as a means to encourage them to think and act reflexively, to question critically and to discover new meanings in whatever it is they are seeking to understand about their puzzles.

Troy's Experience

As I explored the literature about preparing students for employment, I found that my approach and intentions evolved. As a result, I decided to revise the course I was convening so students developed 'business-ready' skills. I decided to experiment with the teaching methodology called inquiry-based learning (Healey, 2005) as a mode of instruction which can be used to increase involvement and participation in active learning. The aims of inquiry-based learning require educators to put learners at the heart of the learning process by asking them to seek information through extensive interrogation of the information available to them. Additionally, through conducting learners' own inquiries; they are asked to investigate new ways of constructing and applying their knowledge. I perceived inquiry-based learning to be a dynamic approach to teaching and learning in which students could explore 'real world' problems and challenges which human resources practitioners often face in their jobs.

I decided that I would introduce debating activities into my course and make it a mandatory part of the overall assessment, which was also mandatorily peer-assessed by students. Debate topics were drawn from various topics and issues covered in the course with the intention of forcing students to argue a point of view and defend it. As this was a human resources course, the material naturally lent itself well to examining important institutions that help form a democracy, including the role of

government, laws, worker associations as well as organisational processes such as skills development and pay systems. My teaching team and I had observed that students responded well to inquiry-based learning and that the debating activities during tutorial time were very popular with learners and tutors alike. Students' and tutors' active participation increased when students could select their own debate topics which offered them greater autonomy over their learning and also offered tutors a greater degree of diversity in learning and teaching. These debating activities were supplemented by my professional experiences working in human resources management. I was able to identify the kinds of competences that students would need to master in order to be successful in their professional careers. As the major assessment, I set a written report where students needed to provide their 'consultation' to a client on how to structure human resource affairs in a fictitious organisation.

In keeping with the principles of both EP and inquiry-based learning, one of the drivers for setting a group assignment was to signal the importance of collaboration in workplace settings. The sharing of ideas, experiences, strategies and knowledge among classmates was emphasised. I didn't want my learners to simply listen to me as a university lecturer and then repeat my thoughts in written form. To me, the combination of these activities reflected the realities that I had experienced of the working world, that is to say—graduates need to voice an opinion, defend positions and articulate their well-informed knowledge and thoughts in both oral and written form. All of this was part of the process of developing a learning and teaching space in which students could explore workplace issues and various important government institutions more generally.

Rhian's Experience of a PEPA

I wanted to target the development of two specific areas of my students' democratic competences: their communicative linguistic skills and their interpersonal skills (see Council of Europe, 2016). EP offered me a basis from which to explore this by steering me to focus more on what occurs in the classroom. It also encouraged me to reflect on Troy's observations

of students' debating activities at the Australian University. Reflecting on what worked with his learners helped me to justify my rationale that holding debates during class time serves to activate learners' sense of democratic participation. This aspect suggested that debates held in the classroom would also work well with students in the Turkish University setting.

However, introducing debating activities was not straightforward because the program's schedule was fixed, and I realised that it would be unfeasible to change the syllabus or course materials in order to further explore my puzzle. Additionally, I was concerned that my students might not be familiar with debates and might be reluctant to participate. Making the decision to hold in-class debates with my learners was filled with uncertainty. This was mainly because the topics and educational materials, which had been preselected by the department's coordinators, were not necessarily relevant or applicable to the notion of developing students' democratic competences in the classroom. EP provided me with a way to explore this uncertainty and risk-taking behaviour by planning and implementing the use of a PEPA during my classes. Therefore, the concept of using a PEPA in the classroom became instrumental in helping me find some space in the program in which I could introduce and facilitate class debates. Fortunately for me, a few of the topics covered in the program lent themselves well to holding a class debate and were deemed by my analysis to be 'exploitable' for supplementary educational and research purposes.

One of the course book's topics introduced the 'The Role of the Media in Today's Society' in which there was a short section which requires learners to express an opinion on whether or not journalists should always tell the truth. A second topic was about whether or not the Internet should be censored by governments. The syllabus stated that the topic should be introduced to the students as an essay-style question which would form part of their assessed writing portfolio assignment. However, I considered that it would be more beneficial to my learners if they had the opportunity to debate the topic before writing about it. Therefore, I used aspects of inquiry-based learning to design the PEPA, which I used during the class in order to maximise the opportunity for my learners to explore the topic for themselves.

Holding a class debate on the truth-telling (or otherwise) of journalists encouraged my learners and me to co-construct our own personalised knowledges, discourses and experiences from within the 'Democratic space' of the class debate. I considered that this topic could be extended to include a free-flow speaking activity and it would be a great opportunity to introduce my students to group debates in class. I told them that during the following day's class they would discuss the topic in a debate and that I would be assessing their language skills—in particular their fluency in English (which would form part of their speaking grade). The PEPA offered me an opportunity to capitalise on using a pedagogical activity with my learners during which I could assess their speaking skills and at the same time expose them to a situation in which they could develop their democratic competences.

In preparation for the class debate, I carefully selected students and put them into a specific group. My selections were primarily based on matching my learners' language abilities and their previous levels of participation in group activities. Before the activities started, I explained to the students that they had specific learning goals to aim for which they could reach while taking part in the debate. Their learning outcomes encouraged them to focus on their communicative, linguistic and interpersonal skills. Once they were settled into groups of four, I asked them to work collaboratively on developing two to three strong reasons that would support their position. I arranged four groups: two groups were arguing 'for' and two groups were arguing 'against.' To scaffold my learners' approach to selecting these reasons, I provided them with some PowerPoint slides which served as 'just-in-time' information prompts to aid their discussion. After around 15 minute's preparation, I shifted the students into pairs so that each newly formed group included two students arguing 'for' and two students 'against.' I gave them 15 minutes to hold the debate. During the stages of the debate, I decided that I would carefully observe specific details regarding my students and record these aspects in shorthand in my field notes. I considered the following aspects would help me build a picture of how my learners were developing their communicative, linguistic and interpersonal skills:

- what they were doing;
- what they were saying;
- how they were interacting;
- their body language and facial gestures; and
- their timing (thinking time, timing of interactions, response-wait time, and listening time)

Critical Observations

I do not wish to imply that this was an unproblematic procedure. As with any class, conflicts arose. As a critical researcher, I therefore provide the following story. While observing my students, an incident occurred between two of them. It was very interesting to observe that two male students, who were usually friendly with one another in class, now found themselves positioned on opposite sides of the debate topic. About eight minutes into their debate, during which they had both been taking turns to listen to each other, one of the students accused the other of lying. He protested to me about this, yet I was determined to remain a neutral observer, mainly because I wanted to see which interpersonal skills the students would incorporate in order to deal with their intense situation. I continued to take field notes without getting pulled into their dispute. One of the male students demanded that I 'do' something but I explained that I was not part of their debate. In fact, I actually had to move away from that group and sit next to another one to see if the two students could work out how to resolve their differences. Unfortunately, the quarrel escalated into a row and one of the students chose to leave his group and join another. At the end of the class, and when the other students had left the room, I asked the two students whether they thought they had reached their learning outcomes. The annoyed student quickly replied, *"It is hard to respect someone who lies."* This incident highlights the challenges that my learners and I experienced during this activity. When dealing with conflict is such a crucial part of life, my learners and I were able to observe the social nature of learning during the in-class debates. Ultimately, our observations helped us to understand how learning can occur even if it may feel tense at times.

Analysis

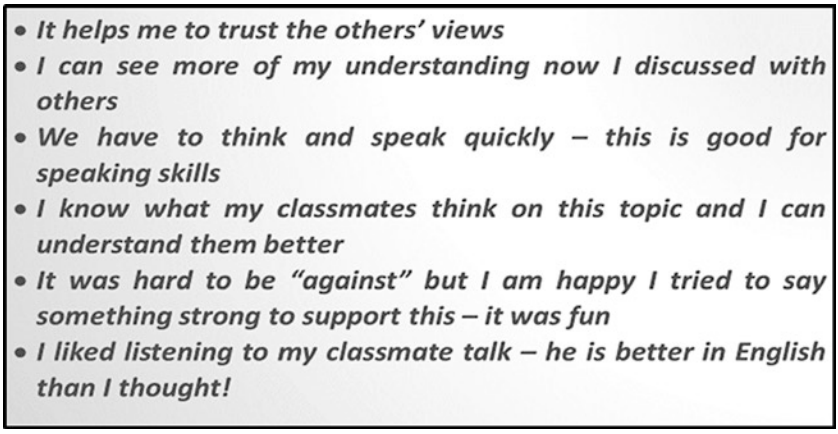
Troy's Learners

The debating activities at the Australian University proved to be a very effective means of extending students' knowledge of the subject. Similarly, debates also provided them with opportunities to develop competences in various important skills, such as analytical and critical thinking skills. But this was not all. The debates offered opportunities to see how ideas and knowledge are born, shared and evolve. Additionally, I observed that the debating activities gave me some insights into the types of democratic competences that learners were using to participate in the debates. For instance, I observed that students were displaying competences that enabled them to engage with and tolerate other people's points of view; build logical and persuasive arguments using factual information that required analytical and critical thinking about the public institutions that shape their societies; and clearly and succinctly communicate any ethical considerations involved in their decision-making.

A review of the qualitative data I collected from multiple course surveys suggests that students enjoyed being in this 'Democratic space', commenting on how they find the learning environment exciting and informative. However, I think more qualitative data needs to be captured in order to get a better sense of whether students are at least more aware of democratic principles that are integral to the human resources profession as well the democratic processes that shape the human resources field.

Rhian's Learners

When the group debates had finished, I asked the learners what they thought were the benefits of holding in-class debates with their peers. The majority of responses I received from my students were very encouraging:



How EP Helped Us to Foster a Democratic Classroom

By using EP as a form of practitioner research, we have been able to identify some of the important variables that educators can introduce when seeking to foster a democratic space in their classrooms.

Enhanced Understandings

We placed a lot of emphasis on garnering mutual respect towards each other and also towards our learners in order to enhance our understandings. We consider that developing fuller understandings by carrying out the class debates also generated greater respect for each other's views. Additionally, co-creating democratic learning experiences in the classroom required high levels of physical and mental energy from us, as educators, and also from our learners. We think this was because we all needed to be much more active in class and learn to adapt to unfamiliar learning and teaching scenarios and situations.

Impact of Learning on Life

We discovered insights into how students critically examined and viewed discipline related topics through the process of debating. We observed

students developing democratic competences, such as critical thinking, interacting without certainty of what the other thinks and feels, and using evidence to support his/her opinions during the debate. Additionally, we experienced incidents of "existential" learning (Bîrzéa, 2000, p. 35) whereby significant moments, situations and incidents in the classroom occur and influence aspects of an individual's lifelong learning.

Life Awareness

Our interactions with each other and our communities of learners kept our teaching practices and EP evolving while also enhancing our awareness and understanding of how aspects of democratic citizenship evolve through social interaction and classroom learning. Throughout our collaboration, we kept learning from each other and from our learners. This quest for greater 'life awareness' also flourished due to our sense of reciprocity which featured highly during our teaching and research practices.

Plurality of Understandings

EP can act as a guide to extending practitioners' own experiences of learning, for instance, we learnt how to accept our successes and failures in creating a democratic classroom as a necessary part of pedagogical innovation and enhanced understanding. We feel that our experience provides learners and educators with a powerful tool that helps them to more fully understand the importance of these endeavours not only for immediate gain but also for longer-term understandings of how to integrate aspects of education for democratic citizenship into higher education programs and degree courses.

Sociality

A very important outcome of sharing our understandings was the evolution of our ideas. By activating our respective PEPAs with our learners, we started to develop our own individual teaching capabilities and skills

in stimulating and strengthening students' democratic participation in the classroom. What started as a project to make sure students in a business degree were 'work ready', and preparatory students were able to study in English, transformed into something more profound, namely, an ongoing investigation into how students and educators can, in fact, learn more about the role of democratic competences, or lack thereof, thereby shaping the understanding of us and others in society.

Sustainability of Mutual Relationships

Strengthening democratic participation in our classes gave us a very real sense that learners and educators can interact in mutual relationships. Having mutual interests in our research was only part of the story during our collaboration. We also put a lot of emphasis on garnering mutual respect towards each other and also towards our learners. Strengthening democratic participation in our classes gave us a very real sense that learners and educators can interact in mutual relationships. What we mean here is that neither the educator nor the learner is dominant or subservient in the democratic classroom; instead, they are interacting on a more equal footing towards mutually beneficial educational purposes. This aspect helped us to sustain our interactions with our learners, as less pressure was put on us, as educators, to tell learners whether they were right or wrong. We were able to observe learners offering each other mutual support, which supported the fifth EP principle of working for 'mutual development' as well as the democratic competence of finding a way to 'respect' other people's views. Throughout our collaboration, we kept learning from each other—particularly how developing students' competency for democratic cultures tied in with our own democratic ideals and notions of democratic citizenship.

Transferability

These types of positive outcomes encouraged us to attempt to understand how this process of learning worked, as well as ways in which to strengthen it. We identified that EP is no longer a research framework that perhaps

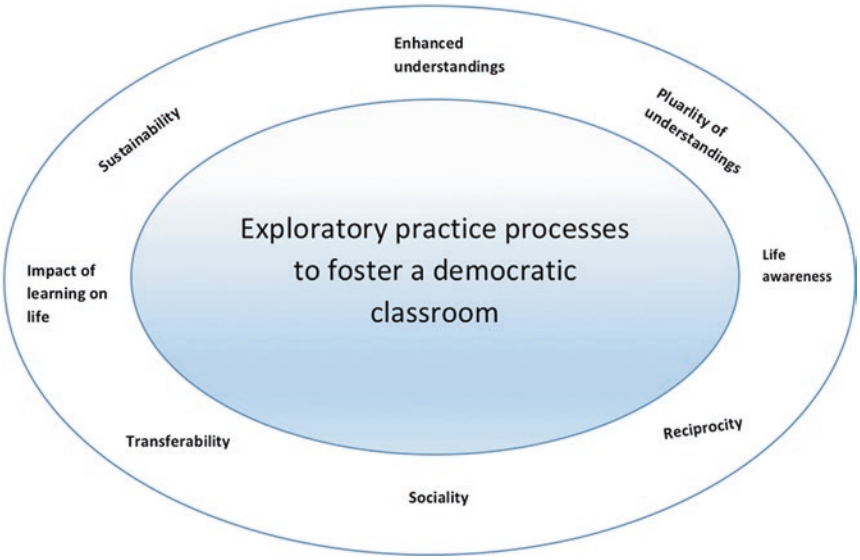


Fig. 9.2 A framework for fostering a democratic classroom

is bound to language learning or language school settings. As demonstrated by the collaboration we forged with one another, we have been able to transplant EP processes into very different contexts: one where the focus was understanding contemporary human resource policies and processes and the other which focused on learning English as a Foreign Language. Therefore, our own investigation into our puzzle has proved that EP is highly adaptable and can be applied to very different educational contexts. We hope that this work will encourage learners in other fields to deploy EP in their own endeavours to enhance understanding of whatever aspect of life they may be curious about (Fig. 9.2).

Our Reflections

The EP principles, as defined by Allwright and Hanks (2009), contributed to the success of our collaborative research practice in many ways. We discuss each of the principles in turn, with reference to our experiences.

Put Quality of Life First

Inquiry-based learning and regular debates put students at the heart of learning in the classroom, and this echoes the EP principle of prioritising quality of life. Our EP wasn't just solely concerned with holding debates; it was also about what the debates targeted—the institutions that shape and influence people's lives, including governments, trade unions, public and political institutions as well as universities and workplaces. This is a key element to building up an awareness of how democracy functions within cultures. The educational value, ideally, is to learn how to deliberate, to debate and then to question how democracies function. Thinking back to when we first started working together on the Human Resource course, we knew very little about Competences for Democratic Culture. The impact of ideas like developing students' competences in order to sustain democratic (work) cultures has not only become a cornerstone to our approach to teaching and learning, but in reality, has shaped our views about the strategic direction in which universities should be heading. We have found ourselves questioning why university curriculum developers, and steering committees working at universities, aren't being more proactive in addressing the development of students' democratic competences in higher education.

Work Primarily to Understand Classroom Life

We certainly found ourselves at various junctures of our collaboration where we began to question how we might be able to 'measure' whether students had in fact developed some democratic competences. However, Allwright (2015) reminds us not to become sidetracked by such rudimentary metrics. Instead, the importance of EP is to gather a better sense of the spectrum of understandings that different people might have of a phenomenon rather than chasing outcomes that may not necessarily help to explain why something occurs. We believe that our practice of understanding how students learnt about democratic principles continues to evolve.

In our work so far, we have come across a number of 'puzzles,' including how the process of learning occurs in different cultural settings, and to even define what terms like 'democratic competences' may mean in different cultural contexts. Having worked to explore these questions while teaching in our courses, we feel we experienced the "continuous commitment" to exploring puzzles that Allwright (2015, p. 13) identifies. However, we were not the only ones who showed a continuous commitment to our puzzles. For instance, in the Human Resources course, students pursued avenues which went beyond the classroom to deliberate 'problems' that the debate topics presented. Students began to meet outside their classes, set up online forums to discuss and exchange ideas as well as reflect on their own ideas about societal institutions beyond the boundaries of just one course. Both students and educators can be seen as "practitioners of learning" (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 6) where they were displaying their own levels of independent decision-making, which is also considered to be one of the core democratic principles of active participation in citizenship.

Involve Everybody

Using an EP approach meant that we could involve our learners much more in our research practices. In this sense, we perceived our learners as "key practitioners of learning" (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 5). Simply by being in our classes and participating in activities during the lessons, there was a symbiotic process where our learners helped us to deepen our understanding of what it is like to create and teach in a democratic space. We could not have done this investigation without our learners and we appreciate and value their active participation in the classroom.

Work to Bring People Together

We found the experience of researching this topic helped us understand ourselves as educators and research practitioners. It also offered ways for us to gain insights into the reasons why we consider the development of students' democratic competences as important and prompted us to share

our experiences with others. Rhian had the opportunity to present our findings at the IATEFL ReSIG Teachers Research Conference at Bahçeşehir University in Istanbul. She presented to a small group of interested participants on how holding a debate on a controversial topic helped her to establish a participatory and engaged atmosphere in her EFL classroom.

Work for Mutual Development

We are also aware of the importance of working towards sustaining democratic cultures and this is why we are keen to engage with educators and learners who are also interested in developing Competences for Democratic Cultures. We believe that our research practice is upheld by other educational communities who are active in this area. In this respect, the notion of 'sustainability' is very important to us and it reflects the EP principle of making our practitioner research a 'sustained enterprise'.

Integrate the Work for Understanding into Classroom Practice

Asking learners what their perceptions, comments, suggestions and opinions are regarding the activation of their democratic participation in the classroom has become a very important part of our teaching practice. We created the possibility of students bringing together their own understanding of the world, and the worlds of their educators, so as to create a democratic space of understanding where students and educators have the possibility to reconsider what makes 'my world, their world' and vice versa. This process encouraged learners to engage more fully in reflecting on the types of democratic cultures they would like to foster and experience. Again, these types of outcomes reflect the objective discussed by Allwright, namely that the understandings developed by EP need to be "lived, rather than expressed in words" (2015, p. 31). This aspect reflected our desire to achieve a greater sense of equality-in-practice in our classrooms by emphasising to students that the sharing of diverse views is one of the fundamental principles of democracy. Our exploration into how

we approach diversity in our classrooms also served to energise our intention to activate a 'diversity by doing' approach by initiating and facilitating discussions and also by co-constructing knowledge during our lessons. We considered that by stimulating experiences of diversity and equality in teaching and learning situations, we could discover more about the nature of students' democratic competences, such as 'otherness' and empathy. We could then find ways to complement and strengthen these competences rather than becoming too focused on merely "finding solutions to a problem" (Allwright, 2015, p. 31). This plurality of understanding could also be seen in the way we as research practitioners engaged with each other. Regular discussions between us was one of the best ways to come to understand our puzzles in greater depth. We are confident that we explored ways of enhancing our professional capabilities in terms of fostering a democratic classroom and extending our research practice into the classroom.

Final Words

As practitioner-researchers, we continue to be interested in exploring how to effectively develop university students' democratic competences and promote democratic classrooms from within our universities. While teaching in our respective universities, we developed insights into how learners' democratic competences can be enhanced and strengthened when cultivating a democratic space with others. We believe that EP afforded an ongoing exchange of our ideas, shared practices and experiences, and in this sense, our practitioner-led exploration continues. Our EP has also shown us that pedagogical knowledge and expertise can flow between educational settings, and also, between diverse democratic cultures.

EP is aimed at enhancing learners' understanding of life and we certainly feel like we have developed a greater empathetic understanding of our learners. We have been able to utilise these understandings to provide our learners with additional didactic opportunities; not only so that they can learn more about the institutions that influence and shape their society, but also so that they can be exposed to developing their

own repertoire of democratic competences. These include critical thinking skills, willingness to listen and a desire to contribute to challenging discussions which can hold a rich diversity of views from which one can learn much. If our understanding of EP is right, any attempt to 'measure' the extent to which learners had developed their democratic competences in the classroom would have served to fundamentally miss the point of exploration. Instead, we continue to take great delight in observing, participating and opening up the 'Third space', as educators and students alike still have so much to learn about each other.

References

Allwright, A. (2015). Putting 'understanding' first in practitioner research. In K. Dikilitaş, R. Smith, & W. Trotman (Eds.), *Teacher-research in action* (pp. 19–36). Kent, UK: IATEFL.

Allwright, D. (2003). Exploratory practice: Rethinking practitioner research in language teaching. *Language Teaching Research, 7*(2), 113–141.

Allwright, D., & Hanks, J. (2009). *The developing language learner: An introduction to Exploratory Practice*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Becker, T. L., & Couto, R. A. (Eds.). (1996). *Teaching democracy by being democratic*. West Port, CT: Praeger Series.

Bîrzéa, C. (2000). *Education for democratic citizenship: A lifelong learning perspective*. Strasbourg: Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe. Retrieved from http://www.nefmi.gov.hu/letolt/nemzet/eu/Education%20for%20Democratic%20Citizenship.pdf

Council of Europe. (2010). *Council of Europe charter on education for democratic citizenship and human rights education*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe Publishing. Retrieved from https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016803034e3

Council of Europe. (2016). *Competences for democratic culture: Living together as equals in culturally diverse societies. Executive summary*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe Publishing. Retrieved from https://book.coe.int/eur/en/human-rights-democratic-citizenship-and-interculturalism/6871-competencies-for-democratic-culture-living-together-as-equals-in-culturally-diverse-democratic-societies.html

Duerr, K., Spajic-Vrkaš, V., & Martins, I. F. (2000). *Strategies for learning democratic citizenship*. Strasbourg: Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe. Retrieved from http://www.storiairreer.it/sites/default/files/norme/2000%2007%2019%20Duerr.pdf

Gerrevall, P. (2002). Proceedings from the European Conference on Educational Research 2002: *Assessing Democratic Competence*. University of Lisbon, 11–14 September 2002. Retrieved from http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00002202.htm

Hanks, J. (2015). Language teachers making sense of Exploratory Practice. *Language Teaching Research, 19*(5), 612–633. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168814567805

Healey, M. (2005). Linking research and teaching: Exploring disciplinary spaces and the role of inquiry-based learning. In R. Barnett (Ed.), *Reshaping the university: New relationships between research, scholarship and teaching* (pp. 67–78). McGraw Hill/Open University Press.

Miller, I., & Cunha, M. (2016). Exploratory Practice in continuing professional development: Critical and ethical issues. In K. Dikilitaş & I. H. Erten (Eds.), *Facilitating in-service teacher training for professional development* (pp. 61–85). IGI Global.

Moje, E. B., McIntosh-Ciechanowski, K., Kramer, K., Ellis, L., Carrillo, R., & Collazo, T. (2004). Working toward third space in content area literacy: An examination of everyday funds of knowledge and discourse. *Reading Research Quarterly, 39*(1), 38–71.

Tracey, D. H., & Morrow, L. M. (2012). *Lenses on reading: An introduction to theories and models*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.