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Sharing Power to Promote Deeper Learning

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Ascribing to Weimer's (2002) philosophy of sharing power with students to increase their responsibility for learning, I invite students in all of my classes to make choices about what readings to complete, ways to complete projects and assignments, and when and how they will demonstrate their understanding. Furthermore, I put students in all of my classes in charge of class policies and peer review guidelines. For instance, in the upper level, writing intensive course, Sociology of Sport and Physical Activity, that is the topic of this article, student committees determined our cell phone policy ("no phone out when people are talking, or when you are doing group work because it can be distracting and rude"), group discussion guidelines, guidelines for peer review, late and missing work policy, and general learning environment policies such as "active listening: eye contact, leaning in, asking questions, looking focused through body language." In these ways my students and I share responsibility for creating a context conducive to deep learning from the very beginning of the course.

Since taking a two-part Preparing Future Faculty course as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, I have been dedicated to being a reflective faculty member. However, not until the summer of 2013, more than ten years into my life as a faculty member, did I come to truly understand and embrace learner-centered ideology and pedagogy. The more I share power with students, the less I feel like I am in a constant tug-o-war where I am pulling students towards learning course content that I chose for them and they are resisting my pull. Now, we are metaphorically moving in the same direction.

Partnering with students begins for me on the first day of any course where I play adventure games with students. As a professor in Sociology of Sport and Recreation, games are a comfortable way for me to teach. Through the games in the first few class sessions, I explain and demonstrate what it means to move from a comfort zone into a stretch zone for learning. I explicitly tell students that this is their course, that I am part of it as a guide to their learning, and that I too am a learner in the course. To me, partnerships with students mean that all of us are working together towards learning.

In this essay I will discuss how I partnered with an entire class during the semester to solve a problem in the book club learning activities I had planned. The book club format was a fishbowl type discussion. Students in the inside circle discussed the book chapters based on questions they prepared ahead of time while the students in the outside circle listened and took notes about discussion themes. Students called on each other in a rotating chair fashion before they switched from the inner to the outer circle. My role as the instructor was observer and facilitator; I did not take part in the discussions.

I was pleased with how students prepared for the two mid-semester book clubs. Students came with notes, highlights and sticky notes in their books. However, beyond asking and responding to one or two questions, the problem was the students did not get deep into discussion that would connect prior knowledge to the ideas in the text. A few students shared insightful observations and everyone else agreed or noted this interesting observation. Students would keep the conversation going but it was a choppy and surface-level discussion, not one that I would expect in an upper-level course in the Physical Education major.

The syllabus indicated that the final exam session would consist of a third book club. I was unsatisfied with planning a culminating experience based on the first two book clubs. I knew that students would do the same kind of surface-level preparation, but the chance for deep learning would be lost. I was stumped as to how to proceed, so I decided to share this concern with my students, and I dedicated an entire class session to trying to resolve it. I told students explicitly that our two book clubs were good in that I knew students came prepared, but it was only a few students who wholeheartedly took part on the discussions or who were able to make connections to prior knowledge or class material, and I knew we could do better.

I also knew that our success early in the semester at creating an open learning environment would allow the students to feel OK when I challenged them about their lackluster discussion. I pointedly asked students why it took a long time to get book clubs one and two started and why students were quiet and only contributed the minimum to the discussion. Making sure to also compliment students on their notes and questions, I pushed them to really think about how we could get everyone in the class involved in a fruitful final book club discussion.

This particular group of 20 students said they were shy to bring up points in front of their peers while everyone in the class was listening. did not have to say much more: the students recognized and felt that they could improve in book club three. Students had noticed that the conversation was slow to progress and that they spent a lot of time in the book clubs looking at their notes and not speaking up. They felt exposed in the inside circle. A quotation from one student's reflection demonstrates student uncertainty:

> When I have been on the inside of the two circles, I challenged myself to speak up and bring up different topics, as well as to add to any topics that had been brought up by fellow classmates. At first this proved to be a very difficult task. Although I am not shy and have no trouble speaking in public, it became nerve-wracking to know I was responsible to contribute productively to the conversation. Fears about what I said not making sense and hopes that my peers would respond to the points [a] brought up were a constant.

Solving the Problem by Committee

I assigned the following committees, and I let the class work: chapters to read for the final book club, preparations expected of students, assessment, how the book club should be organized (as distinct from book clubs one and two), and ways to encourage more and deeper participation. Student committees presented their work, and a full class discussion served to clarify the details of the format, the assessment rubric, and the assigned chapters.

Through this process, students decided on a whole new format for the book club. Formerly, the book club had a fishbowl structure, with an inside discussion group and an outside note-taking group. In the new format, students explained that each class member would be primarily responsible for one "home group" chapter. They were to bring in notes, questions and observations focused on that chapter. The final book club would begin with students arriving and writing initial thoughts from the readings on the whiteboard. Students would then join their home group to start the session by discussing the main chapter points and agreeing on key points to bring to the next group. This roundtable discussion required each member to share before the group decided on which points to bring to the next group.

Round two of the discussion consisted of new groups of students, one from each home group. In these groups, students also used a round table discussion format where they heard from each student and then started a discussion about connections between the chapters and ideas. Here they were to discuss what the "take home message" of the all the assigned chapters. They had to shape this message and be ready to bring it back to their home groups.

It was incredibly exciting to listen in on the committee discussions, and to decide as a group how we would end our fifteen weeks together. I posted the notes about the final book club format and the rubric students created on our Blackboard site. The rubric was a self-assessment for students to complete after book club three. I also created one slide to post on the projector as

students came in to remind students of the new book club format. Committees within the class planned all facets of the final exam session. Ultimately, student preparation, engagement and reflection on learning exceeded my expectations.

Book Club Three

Book club three was enjoyable, engaging and exciting to watch. Again, I was only the facilitator, and I did not sit in the discussion groups voicing my opinion. The differences from book clubs one and two were marked. The biggest differences were the energy in the room and the preparation of the students. They seemed to take very seriously their duty to prepare fully on their home group chapter. Additionally, they had a responsibility to bring key points to the second group so this added a level of shared responsibility. Enjoyment in learning and the vibe in the room were different in book club three. I also enjoyed the final exam session much more than in the past. Again I believe it felt less like the students and I were at odds to get work done. It felt much more like students came to the exam session with a purpose that was meaningful.

Student Reflections

The students who participated in this process also seemed to experience it as exciting and even transformative. Below are several comments they offered:

> "In this class I have gone out of my comfort zone of just getting the work done from the back seat and laying low to more of a facilitator. This was evident during the book club where I tried to come up with a topic that had the most interested thought provoking message behind it and waited until the whole circle commented on it then played devil's advocate as I then looked at the contradictory argument and also tried discussing it with the whole group. The statement I used in the book club was on how Brazil wanted to preserve and keep Pele from becoming profitable as a global icon that he was." [*sic*].

> "Today I think I did a much better job in preparing for the book club in general. For example, I was able to draw up quotes from the book randomly to add to the current discussion. On top of that I felt I understood what I read better which helped me ask more in depth questions."

> "Today I was a lot better prepared that the other book clubs and it showed. I was able to ask questions and answer question. As a group we all did a great job of summarizing the chapters and spoke a lot." [*sic*].

Many faculty may read these comments and think that this is exactly what a jigsaw activity does. I would argue that it was deeper and more important than a jigsaw I would plan because students organically created this activity as a way to showcase their learning, promote discussion and end the semester on a positive note. It was the right activity at the right time because the students planned it. Students, armed with the freedom to make their own choices about learning, relied on each other to plan and implement a meaningful learning experience that was truly their own.

While this partnership happened organically during the semester, I plan to use what I have learned to give students similar freedoms in planning their own learning activities. The payoff of student learning is worth much more than my fear or uncertainty of giving up power in the classroom.

What I Gained From The Experience

As a teacher working in partnership with my students, I learned a number of important lessons:

- To trust students to create challenging activities. When I overheard students saying, 'We should read chapter 5 because it is short,' I ignored it. It turned out that as a group, students chose assignments, assessments, preparation that were challenging, and they behaved a lot more like adult learners throughout the whole process. They actually also did the work.

- Through giving even more power to students, deeper learning was the result.
- I can partner with a whole class of students and the partnership challenges students to take responsibility for their learning and to think about and promote their own learning.
- When planning book club discussions for the coming semesters, I plan to choose the text myself. But I plan to work with students as partners before the first book club to plan and shape the format of all the book club learning activities.
- To not be afraid to try activities that students suggest. As faculty, we often plan discussions or other lessons that fall flat with students. I argue that students are in tune with their peers and the class as a whole. If you trust them to create and shape class activities, they will not disappoint you. As a class, you can reflect on how the activity worked to promote learning or to create knowledge.

Reference

Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching. Five key changes to practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.