Original Paper

Teaching and Learning Democratically in a Public High School:

Challenges Presented in a High-Stakes Environment

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Abstract

The New York State Board of Regents adopted the Common Core Curriculum, the implementation increased testing requirements and rigidity in classrooms. However well-intentioned, standardization and increased testing conflict with theories and research that support authentic learning and collaboration. Implementing methods to empower and engage students can feel nearly impossible within a high stakes environment. This article discusses the findings of an action research study conducted to explore ways for teachers to engage students to become active participants in both teaching and learning. Students were encouraged to explore a democratic learning environment in which they worked collaboratively to develop lesson plans for social studies that adhered to state requirements. The findings showed a profound shift in perceptions of teaching and learning by students and teacher.

Keywords

high stakes, democratic learning, student engagement, collaboration, Common Core, authentic learning, student perspective

1. Introduction

1.1 Statement of Problem and Goals of the Study

In September 2012, I was preparing to conduct an action research study that would become the basis for my dissertation and … I was panicking. I had a carefully laid plan to implement a democratic learning environment in one section of a 10th grade Global Studies class. The planning, theorizing, and discussion with my doctoral cohort about this venture had been exhilarating. The implementation was terrifying. My idea of democratic learning was that students would be actively involved in teaching and learning processes. This would be achieved by teaching students to collaboratively develop their own lesson plans, start to finish. However, the class dynamics, increased state requirements, and high stakes

nature of the course instilled me with fear that without traditional instruction, the students might not be successful. Regardless, I'd spent a year developing this plan, so I forged ahead. As a result, the findings of this study fundamentally changed the ways I view teaching, learning, and the roles of students and teachers. It is my hope that these findings prompt a dialogue that will challenge traditional methods and roles within the classroom, and instead, encourage and promote democratic learning practices.

1.2 Brief Background of the Study

Educational research indicates that high stakes testing is counterintuitive to a positive learning and teaching process for both students and teachers (Gee, 2000; Hursh, 2008). Conversely, educational policies at both state and federal levels have increased emphasis on testing of a high stakes nature. The results of these tests are gathered into data used to evaluate students, teachers, and administrators. This topic is germane to current trends in education and to me personally. The rigid parameters of social studies curriculum and testing have permitted me to mostly teach of democratic methods, but not to practice them in the classroom.

Throughout my teaching career of twenty years, I have taught exclusively in New York State and hold certifications in Social Studies 7-12 and Special Education K-12. The majority of my experience has been teaching Global Studies and Geography. The course is generally divided into two years. At the end of the course, students must pass a comprehensive exam consisting of fifty multiple-choice questions that cover six thousand years, one thematic essay question, and a Document-Based Question (DBQ). Students are given three hours to take the exam and it often takes the entire three hours. In the recent past, all students in NYS were required to pass this exam in order to graduate from high school. Moreover, the CCSS has required that schools, teachers, and administrators include passing rates and scores as an indicator of success. It is, therefore, high stakes for many constituencies.

While high stakes exams and adherence to standards are a national reality, educators seek ways to work within these boundaries without sacrificing meaningful learning opportunities. In this study, collaborative lesson planning was introduced as a means to promote democratic learning. This method encouraged a redefining of traditional roles within this social studies classroom. As trust was built amongst the participants, elements of a democratic learning environment emerged. These elements will be presented and discussed in this article.

1.3 Questions Guiding the Study

Throughout this action research study, adherence was maintained to social constructivist learning theory and Newmann's (1992) categories of authentic engagement to promote collaborative participation, and problem solving through reflection. Moreover, the study explored ways to increase active student participation in the educational process by collaboratively setting goals, choosing assessments, and developing lesson plan activities. These methods helped to answer the following overarching question and sub-questions: What is the nature of the classroom community when collaborating with high school students to develop lesson plans that align with NYS and CC Standards?

- How do student perceptions of teaching and learning change through this collaboration? How does this process influence my practice?
- How does collaborative lesson planning affect student participation in the classroom?
- What challenges arise in trying to develop collaborative lesson plans in an era of high-stakes testing and common core curriculum standards?

These questions helped to guide the study. While an abundance of research supported the positive effects of collaboration and authentic learning, there was very little that explored teachers as active collaborators with students and even less that positioned students as insiders.

1.4 Theoretical Framework and Literature

Collaborative learning practices are rooted in the social constructivist learning theories of Lev Vygotsky (Drucker, 1999; Moran & John-Steiner, 2003). Social constructivists view the incorporation of collaborative practices in the educative process as necessary to facilitate learning for students, as well as important to the planning processes for teachers (Fulton, 2003). Vygotsky (1978) provided the theoretical structure for collaboration in his observations regarding the construction of knowledge as a social process also provided theoretical structure by writing about it. He proposed that individuals acquire knowledge through social interactions and that, "knowledge construction [is] a social, cooperative venture" (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003). Therefore, an underlying assumption about collaboration is that learning and knowledge are co-constructed with others. The process of co-construction impacts self-efficacy and promotes positive learning experiences for both the instructor and the learner (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014).

These ideas have provided the foundation for further work conducted on student engagement and authentic learning such as the factors of student engagement, as identified by Newmann (1992). According to Newmann, there are four categories of factors that influence student work. These categories include: A) Need for competence; B) Student engagement in academic work; C) School membership; and D) Authentic work. These factors were used to stage a collaborative classroom environment.

Increasingly, academic research demonstrates that student-teacher collaboration has positive results (Christie, 2000; Friend & Cook, 2003; Kuh, 1995). These results are found across areas such as more meaningful lessons, increased achievement, and student perception of educational ownership (Belgarde, Mitchell, & Arquero, 2002).

While educators have been encouraged to develop collaborative classroom environments (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2004), the acceptance of national curricular standards has placed heightened emphasis on teacher accountability (Peterson, 2002; Wright, 2002). Moreover, because test scores are used as a way to measure the effectiveness of teachers, the pressure to increase and maintain high student achievement on tests has caused some educators to teach *to the test* and in some instances, cheat (Amerin-Beardsley, Berliner, & Rideau, 2010). Since test preparation is emphasized more than ever, I experienced a great deal of anxiety about conducting this study. Yet, I was eager to find ways to improve

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my own practice and explore the possibility of creating a learning environment in which the construction of knowledge is a shared, meaningful experience for all of us.

1.5 Overview and Design

This study was conducted in a public school, with a tenth grade class, in a rural community in upstate New York. The school serves approximately 600 students K-12. The student population is largely Caucasian with little ethnic diversity. The majority of the students live in surrounding rural areas with more than fifty percent receiving free or reduced lunch. Hence, the school has a significant student population in poverty and receives Title I funds. The tenth grade class has approximately 50 students and is divided into three sections. The study was conducted with one section of 14 students, ages 15 to 16, with widely varying abilities. High honor and honor roll students worked alongside four students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and two students who were Second Language Learners (SLL). The wide variety of abilities represented in the class is typical of public school.

While I was initially concerned with the challenges of these diverse learners, I felt that it would provide a more authentic experience that was transferrable. All of the students must earn course credit, a requirement for graduation, and successfully pass a state exam covering the content, at the time a graduation requirement. If compliance is not maintained with the curriculum, standards, and testing requirements, teachers and principals face the possibility of imposed improvement plans and even dismissal.

2. Methods and Intervention

Over the course of approximately twelve weeks, this study considered the nature of a classroom in which the teacher and the students in a 10th grade Global Studies class collaborated to align with learning goals as required by the CCSS, create learning activities, and develop assessments. We also reflected both individually and together in order to identify areas of success and areas to mark for improvement. The study schedule was designed to adhere to the action research cycle to: A) plan, B) act, C) observe, and D) reflect. This four step iterative plan provided the model for the collaborative lesson planning within the requirements of the CCSS. The following schedule is inclusive of this plan:

Table 1. Schedule of Study

	Week 1	Week 3	Week 5	Week 8	Weeks 9-10	Weeks 11-12
	9/5-9/18 **Begin first cycle**	9/19	10/5-10/10 **End first cycle**	10/22 **Begin second cycle**	11/10	11/26-12/4 **End second cycle**
Plan	*Recruitment *Identify problem, set learning goals. *Explain state requirements, CCSS, and state assessment for the course. *Explain the first unit of study- Enlightenment Period.	*Collaboratively plan Age of Revolutions unit- *Identify CCSS learning goals, design lesson plan learning activities, develop assessments such as, homework, pre-assessments, peer editing, quizzes, tests, and writing components.	Data collection	*Drawing from our experiences-Plan a new unit- Industrial revolution/Imperialism and geography- *Identify CCSS goals, design lesson plan learning activities and develop assessments such as, homework, pre-assessments, peer editing, quizzes, tests, and writing components. .	As we were discussing the influence of Nationalism throughout the 1800's the students asked to read a book for class that the Honors section had read. As a result, we included an un-projected lesson plan.	Data collection
Act	*Implement the activities- Identify the lesson content of the Enlightenment as it adheres to the CCSS and state assessment. *Showed students	*Implement the activities- *Identify the lesson content of the Age of Revolutions as it adheres to the CCSS and state assessment. *Discussed specific language in this	Data collection-surveys-focus groups	*Implement the activities- Identify the lesson content the Industrial revolution/Imperialism and geography the as it adheres to the CCSS and state assessment. *Discuss specific language in this regard. Completed the unit of study.	*Implement the activities- *Identify the lesson content of the book as it adheres to the CCSS and state assessment.	Data collection- surveys- focus groups

	specific language in this regard. Completed the first unit of study.	regard. Completed the unit of study.				
Observe	Monitored the interaction and nature of the classroom (journaling and field notes)	Monitored the interaction and nature of the classroom (journaling and field notes)	Journaling/field notes Coding	Monitored the interaction and nature of the classroom (journaling and field notes)	Group discussions and democratic decision-making had become the norm. Journal/field notes/member checking	Journaling/field notes Coding
Reflect	Mutually considered if we met the CCSS. Reflected on the process and perspectives. What were the positives and drawbacks?	Mutually consider if we met the CCSS. Reflected on the process and perspectives. What were the positives and drawbacks?	Student survey-Reflection-Focus groups	Mutually consider if we met the CCSS. What were the positives and drawbacks?	Ongoing discussions about process.	Student survey-Reflection-Focus groups-member checking

The methods of data gathering for this study included the following: a) online survey; b) student written reflection; c) focus groups; d) teacher reflections; and e) teacher field notes and journaling.

The first step involved planning. Students were introduced to the state requirements of the course and the CCSS. They were also shown sample state exams required for course credit and graduation. Together, we identified goals and discussed lesson plan activities. Students were taught the lesson planning process. They were instructed to take notes in their classes over the next few days to identify how every class, regardless of the subject, followed a similar pattern of review, introduction, delivery of new content, summary, and practice. They were amazed by this. Random, informal conversations would ensue that compared biology class to English class as students identified each element of the lesson plans and that although the courses were dramatically different in content, the structure of class was essentially the

same. This was the first step toward becoming insiders to teaching, not just learning.

In Step Two of the cycle we covered the unit, Age of Revolutions. Transferring the ideas of democracy from 1700 to current relatable events was an underlying goal to which I attempted to steer the class. At this point, students had a firm grasp of state requirements and we began to plan the lessons collaboratively for this unit. One full class period was utilized to teach the students how to plan lessons. Next, we discussed their observations drawn from Step One. Then they brainstormed effective learning activities and created a master list. I kept field notes while observing their interactions. The class was then divided into four groups, with 3-4 members in each. Three of the groups were given the task of designing lesson plans for a particular segment of the unit and one group was assigned to develop assessments.

In Step Three, students completed a brief survey regarding the experience. The surveys consisted of ten or fewer questions and the results were compiled by an online service. The questions were designed to prompt their ideas about teaching and learning and how their perspectives might change if they become more actively involved in the process. Next, they were provided reflective prompts to probe their perceptions in more depth. Using the responses from the reflections, a protocol was developed for focus groups that allowed member checking of my perceptions. This phase of data collection also provided us with an opportunity to discuss what we might change in the next collaboration and aided my own reflections.

Following the first full cycle, we made some changes and began the next phase. The second collaboratively planned unit covered the Industrial Revolution in Britain, Imperialism, and geography. The student-planned lessons became far more creative than I had expected (discussed in the Findings). When the planning and implementation of two units of study were concluded, we again completed a survey and written reflection. This reflection included prompts that guided the student to explore her or his personal experience and views regarding the educational process and their own perspectives of teaching and learning. This was followed by another focus group, two groups of seven people.

Additionally, field notes and personal reflections were compiled that aligned with the standards of an ethnographic case study. This method assisted more accurate recollection of verbal and nonverbal interactions amongst the students as they constructed meaning of their tasks and content. As both a researcher and participant, I observed and documented the interactions within the site. Therefore, data collection for this study was largely qualitative. Qualitative researchers seek to understand human behavior and experience how individuals construct meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

2.3 Analysis: Grounded Theory and Action Research

Analysis of the data was conducted simultaneously with the collection of the data. Conducting analysis throughout the collection allows the researcher to identify gaps in the data at early stages (Charmaz, 2006). All sources of datai. e. surveys, reflections, transcripts of focus groups, and teacher memos and field notes, were analyzed using a four step method. This method included the following:

Step 1. Initial Coding

Step 2. Focused Coding

Step 3. Developing categories

Step 4. Using categories to identify themes (Saldaña, 2009).

Utilizing these methods, and acting as a participant and researcher, I analyzed the collected data to identify patterns, routines and consistencies. This grounded theory approach, and my participatory role, provided insight to the student perspective. Through careful examination and reflection on the data, patterns began to emerge to build theory. As a largely qualitative study, a presupposition was that data exists in all environments and meaning and theories are extracted from them (Charmaz, 2006; Emerson, Shaw, & Fretz, 1995). Moreover, grounded theorists use and emphasize participatory interactions and their co-construction of meaning as primary sources of data and analysis.

The success of this study was due in part to flexibility on the part of all participants, as well as the willingness to trust one another in order to shift our individual responsibilities to mutually shared responsibilities. Experiencing learning and teaching from new perspectives resulted in a democratic learning environment and overall positive experience for the participants.

3. Findings

As students planned their lessons, each participant utilized activities that were best suited to their own needs. Following this step, students brainstormed activities that were memorable from other classes-things they enjoyed and also remembered the content. This demonstrated how memorable lessons included the learning activities that best suited the learning needs of each individual. Students became very in tuned to one another's preferences. The following day, we made a master list of these activities. As the list began to form, other ideas were generated from the group. I also added activities. In this way, we all made contributions. Thus began the collaborative process, and my movement from a dominant role to that of a participant. It was from this perspective that I made observations. As analysis of these data began, emergent themes were identified that are presented in the Diagram of Democratic Learning shown here.
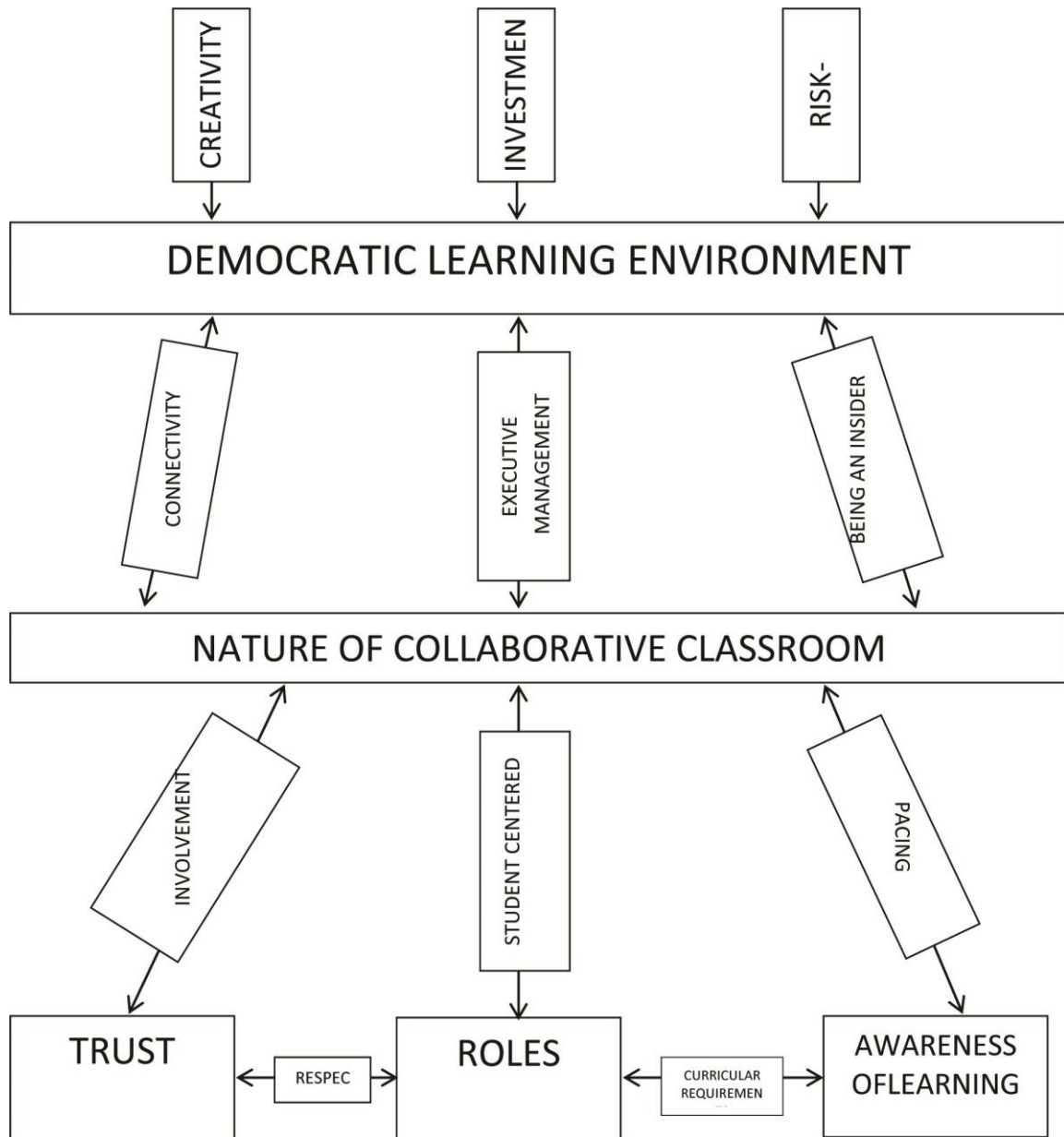
Figure 1. Diagram of Democratic Learning

3.1 Evolution of the Diagram

Although I sought to observe the dynamics of the collaborative classroom community as one of the guiding research questions, I did not anticipate that it would take on its own energy and identity. The diagram presents the *nature of the collaborative classroom* in a central location. The term nature is used with purpose, because the environment in the classroom evolved in ways that could not have been planned or predicted. Our interaction, roles, and communication took new forms. This evolution continued throughout the study. The collaborative process was dramatically different at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. Initially, the students were enthusiastic, albeit apprehensive with the new concept of participating in the study. This is demonstrated by my recorded observations.

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"At first, they were thrilled with the idea of making their own plans-little homework and tests, but when they realized that they had to rely on themselves and one another to be accountable for their learning, the mood changed. I told them they would be working most often in small groups and asked if they wanted to choose their own groups or if they wanted me to.

*** Very telling- Only 1 person wanted students to choose the groups" (Field Notes, 9/7/12).

This excerpt indicates the enormity of trust in the collaborative relationship. Analysis yielded the foundational features of our collaborative classroom as trust, roles, and awareness of learning. Additional sub-features that were instrumental to the development of the nature of the collaborative classroom included the following: respect, understanding curricular requirements, familiarity with pacing of content, comfort and a shift from teacher-centered planning to student-centered planning and learning, and encouraging involvement of all students. As my role morphed from the dominant character to a supportive participant, my practice was also affected. These features are briefly explained as they relate to the research questions.

Foundational Categories: Trust, Roles, and Awareness of Learning

Throughout data collection and analysis, recurrent codes and subsequent categories emerged. These categories represent the foundation on which the collaborative classroom was built. In retrospect, they were essential to the success of the study. The most important was the development of trust.

3.1.1 Trust

Trust is placed at the cornerstone of the diagram purposely. This was the first, most notable feature that was consistent throughout the study. Trust was exercised in three capacities, *student to student, students to teacher, and teacher to students*. When the idea of the study was first introduced to the students with a request for consent, the anxiety in the room was almost palpable. As discussed earlier, the course must follow the CCSS and it concludes with a high stakes exam. We all felt the pressure of this. It was clear that the students were anxious about trusting one another with adequate preparation for this exam. It was also clear that I needed to gain their trust to ensure this preparation and that we wouldn't waste twelve weeks of instruction. Additionally, I realized that *I* had to trust the students. I had agonized for days about changing the groups in that I was concerned about the dynamics of the class, their mixed abilities, and levels of motivation. However, discussion and feedback from my colleagues helped me concede that my primary goal was not to prove the success of collaborative lesson planning but to observe the nature of the classroom. Moreover, I wanted the study to be transferrable. In order to achieve this, I needed a class dynamic that would represent a typical classroom, not one that consisted of teens with exceptional drives to succeed. In short, I had to trust my students. Therefore, trust was identified in three distinct manifestations, *Teacher to student, Student to teacher*, and *Student to student*. The following excerpts from my field notes indicate the importance of developing trust amongst the participants:

"The students are apprehensive-they don't trust one another at all to work and be accountable" (Field Notes, 9/10/12).

"Much of this initial time is taken by teaching students how planning works. Today I went over different types of assessments tomorrow we will discuss learning activities. These things are taking a lot of time and concern me. The students are also apprehensive about this. I comforted them by reiterating that I am still in charge and will make certain they learn what they need to. The tone seemed to relax then, but only minimally" (Field Notes, 9/10/12).

Initially, it felt that we were taking a leap of faith. After the initial hesitation, however, momentum increased. The building of trust was the key component that initialized this venture, but also propelled the collaboration to take on new characteristics. Moreover, we all became enthusiastic about our redefined roles.

3.1.2 Roles

As the study progressed, my position as teacher shifted from dominant to supportive and eventually to participant. By week three, I felt more like a facilitator, helping to guide the students through the organization of lesson planning, providing resources, answering questions, and ensuring adherence to the curriculum and CCSS. My knowledge and expertise was accessed and shared as directed by the students. By week ten, near the end of the study, I truly felt like a full participant. Although my authority was never in question, the collaboration had evolved into a group/class experience. The students no longer separated into groups. As a class, we would brainstorm lesson activities, assignments, and deadlines. It was liberating. In these ways, my perspective of teaching and learning changed, as well as my practice. The opportunity to have a free exchange is demonstrative of the level of comfort that developed as my role became less dominant. For example, the responses to question three on the final reflection completed in Week Twelve, further demonstrates the changes in our roles.

"R2Q3 in what ways do you feel that collaborative lesson planning can make you more aware of the role of the teacher or how content can be taught?

- The role of teacher is less. And dominant to student. I sort of like it.
- It shows me how much effort they put in just towards a lesson.
- We were able to put ourselves in the teacher's perspective throughout the lesson planning. There was certain criteria we had to meet" (Reflection Two, December 2012).

While these responses demonstrate how students assumed the planning role and viewed my role as less dominant, they also reflect the enlightened attitudes of students toward their own learning and helped to identify student perspectives of teaching and learning. The next section will address this new awareness.

3.1.3 Awareness of Learning

During first phase, students were assigned to generate activities that were memorable from other classes. In this way, a master list of activities was formed that focused the students to identify their own learning preferences. In order to develop a quality list of activities and achieve early student buy-in of the venture, students independently considered powerful learning experiences in their lives and

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education. These types of learning experiences range across contexts and circumstances and "may lead to guidance for instructional designers seeking to achieve high-level learning outcomes" (Rowland, Lederhouse, & Satterfield, 2004). We all made contributions. Next, the students were separated into groups and assigned tasks. Those groups were assigned lesson design using the textbook as a guide for the content. A generic template lesson plan and time/pacing guidelines was provided. When the participants planned the lessons, each student utilized activities that were best suited to her/his individual needs. Thus began student awareness of learning. The following exchange is in response to my prompt asking students to discuss the lesson planning experience with regard to the ways in which they learn. Students were asked to describe the collaborative lesson planning experience thus far. It is taken from the first participant group interview held in week five:

"Fg1 Student: Teachers always planned it. We never really thought about it. It was just the teachers.

Fg1 Student: That you get to think about how you learn and then apply it to the lesson plan" (Focus Group One, Participant Group One, Lines 15-30).

Moreover, questions One and Two on Reflection One directed students to examine their experiences with teaching and learning. Some students elaborated more than others, but the following sampling represents the general nature of the responses. Three students reported that they had "experienced teaching in a different way", and two students felt that "learning was more effective" (October, 2012). The responses demonstrate new awareness.

New elements emerged to connect the major themes. These elements include: Respect, understanding and working with Curricular Requirements, and Pacing the coverage and delivery of content. Additionally, it was exciting to note that our collaborative classroom had developed into an environment that was student-centered and involved all participants. I did not fully appreciate this shift until the above responses were coded during early analysis. These features were necessary to connect the major themes in order to practice effective collaboration. While emergence of these factors are documented and defined in the full analysis, the limits of this article do not permit me to do it here, but they are relatively self-explanatory.

3.2 The Nature of the Collaborative Classroom

The data presented the nature of the collaborative classroom to include themes of trust, roles, and awareness of learning. Moreover, as students became familiar with the curricular requirements and the CCSS, some of the anxiety was alleviated. We were able to meet the standards while increasing participation and developing a sense of community. This changed our perceptions of teaching and learning. The following evidence from the data reveals the changes in relationships and a new community that developed in our classroom.

"Student: It feels more like I guess I don't know how to put it. Kinda like a family. It doesn't really feel like we're really like being talked down and we do not have to do every little thing possible. Like school. It's more like we are actually communicating more. Therapy" (Focus Group One, Participant Group One,

Lines 261-264, October 2012).

Having firmly established the foundations and features of the collaborative classroom, the sense of community in our learning environment was striking. I began to experience a more significant rapport with these students. The following selection from my field notes indicates the changes in rapport and comfort levels of the students:

"I have noticed that students who are usually in the background feel more relaxed. For example- essays were due today and those who did not complete them sought me out individually to explain why as opposed to just asking if it could be turned in later. Janet explained that she was responsible to watch siblings all weekend because her uncle has cancer and her mother had to get him to his treatments and care for him. Bernice (who has prior to this experience barely said 2 words to me all last year) explained that her family is in turmoil and there was yelling and fighting all weekend and that her father has threatened to move away. Nora- who hates speaking in front of others was her group spokesperson today" (Field Notes, 10/22/12).

The data indicated that students were becoming active agents in their learning, as opposed to passive receivers. At this point, I also noted increased motivation and willingness to work, beyond expectations, in all of the participants. Our collaborative classroom was poised to evolve into a democratic learning environment. Thorough examination of the data helped to identify three key elements that contributed to this transition, they include Connectivity, Executive Management, and Being an Insider.
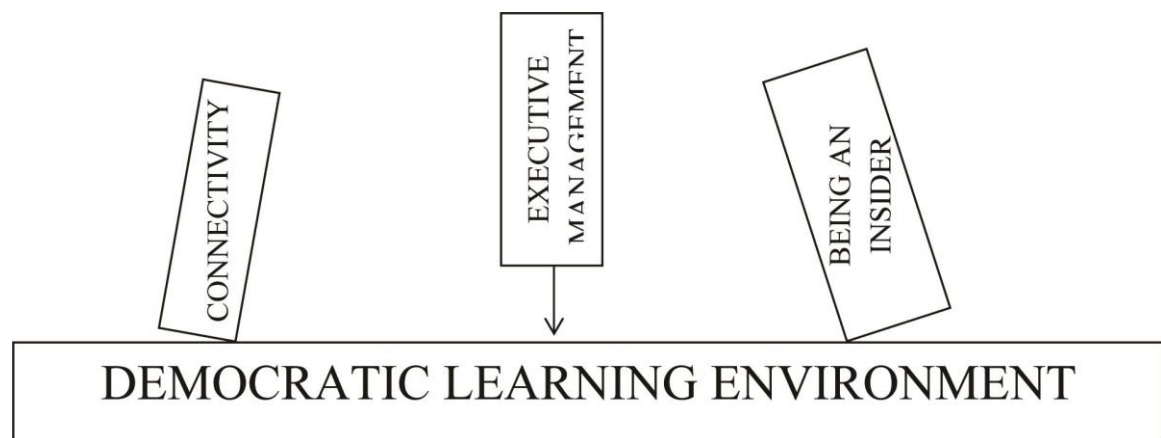
Figure 2. Subcategories 1

Following the first round of data collection when the students shared their experiences and thoughts on the study, the process of collaboration changed. The day following data collection was scheduled as a lesson-planning day. By this point, students organized themselves and no longer needed instruction from me to form into groups. Eventually, students chose not to form into groups at all. Rather, they began to work as one collaborative group. Again, this was completely without direction from me. As they talked about the possibilities of learning the content, ideas were shared throughout the room. I started taking notes on the board, trying to keep the thoughts organized. Then, something dramatic

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happened. One student inquired about studying the topic in the same manner that the Honors section was covering it. The topic was nationalism, pride in one's nation/culture, and the ways in which it was manifested during the Nineteenth Century. The Honors section had been assigned an autobiography as a method to tie the topic to current events, connections to the local community, and recognize the impact of an individual. When the possibility was presented to the group, I said that it was not my decision, but that the group would have to decide, majority rule.

This was our first truly democratic experience. It had occurred naturally without my direction. It is also another manner with which students shifted from being reluctant and passive to active and engaged learners. I went back to the data to find elements contributing to this transition and begin with connectivity.

3.2.1 Connectivity

This term identifies the sense of connection that students began to exhibit with one another, myself, and even to the content. The following description of a scene from my field notes is presented to clarify connectivity.

"I notice that students have real ownership in the lesson activities they prepare. When times or activities are modified some students voice their dissatisfaction that an activity has not taken place. For example, this week I needed to add one day to the plan. Students had prepared for four days of lessons but I needed to cover one additional topic so I planned and added one day to the plan. One student (Bruce-male) was emphatic that he wanted his idea of a review activity—a crossword designed from the vocabulary used in the chapter- be used and not discarded. For two days he fussed about it until I promised him that we would do it. Another student in the class offered to make the crossword so that he would be appeased" (Field Notes, 10/28/12).

Moreover, students began to design assessments that were more advanced than I had ever planned for this section of the course. In addition to reading the book, the students chose to write formal letters to the author. At this point, even the most reluctant students began to seek opportunities in their learning. Probing further in the data, I labeled executive management as another element in this unique environment.

3.2.2 Executive Management

Executive Management refers to the ability of students to organize learning and assessments, while balancing the demands of all of their courses and activities. It was promoted when given the opportunity to choose assignments. It also relies on informal reflection to gauge progress. Again, these practices are individual and the choice of the student. For example, students explained that they were willing to take on additional assignments, such as reading the autobiography because they did not have assigned books in other classes to read at the time. Furthermore, students explained that planning the lessons and knowing the assignments well in advance helped them to manage time more effectively between all classes. Reflecting upon this, students felt that it resulted in the improvement in their grades. The following feedback is provided to further clarify executive management from the

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perspectives of the participants:

Satterfield: "Why do you think [grades went up] that happened? And I never expected that to happen.

Student: Because with us planning it we make sure that we learn it and we know what we are learning" (Focus group One, Participant Group One, Lines 66-69, October 2012).

Student: "I don't know. I think it's because we are more interactive and because we know what's going to happen next. So we are like prepared" (Lines 261-262).

Student: "For me, about the effort that increased, it is kind of the same. I said that because in normal daily life I see how teenagers fight what they are supposed to, like I do all the time. Like if I am told to do something, I don't want to do it. But if I make it myself, like we did in this, it gives me more of an effort to want to do something. So it gives more cooperation with the students" (Focus Group Two, Participant Group One, Lines, 75-79, December 2012).

With some relation to Executive Management, the final contributing element consistent in the data that supported this democratic learning environment was being an Insider.

3.2.3 Being an Insider

It became apparent that students felt privy to a practice, lesson planning, an activity that previously they had only experienced passively. This allowed students to take control and be active in their own learning. One student noted,

"Yeah I kinda felt like us putting these lessons together, you know what is upcoming and 'oh we are learning about this today because we built it'" (Focus Group One, Participant Group Two, Lines, 27-28, October 2012).

At this point, I recognized that student control of planning the class freed them to allocate the demands for their time amongst courses and other responsibilities. Not only were the students more involved, but more of their work was completed on time, and with quality. I addressed my observation regarding the increase in completion rates of homework on the final reflection. It was the first time in my entire teaching career of fifteen years that a class had a 100% homework completion rate. I addressed this with the participants in the second reflection and elicited the following responses:

- Yes, and the lesson plans that we made then are showing us that we know what is next.
- When a teenager like us is told to do something we don't really wanna do it but if we choose it ourselves we're more likely to do it. Plus us teenagers have a clue what our schedules are like and we know what we're able to get done or not.
- Because you know what has to be done ahead of time so you know what you have to complete. (Reflection Two, Question Five, December 2012).

Moreover, when asked to describe the overall experience of the study in one word or a phrase, one student responded "insightful". When I asked him to describe this he responded,

"Well, we got to see what teachers have to do to plan the lesson plans" (Focus Group Two, Lines, 168-169, December 2012). Therefore, connectivity, executive management, and being an insider were key elements to the functionality of this democratic learning environment.

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3.3 Observations of the Democratic Learning Environment

After assessing the data, it was my determination that when students engage in a democratic learning environment they became active agents in their learning. Moreover, the extent of creativity, investment and risk-taking cannot be predicted or bounded. I provide the following data sources as evidence of this claim.
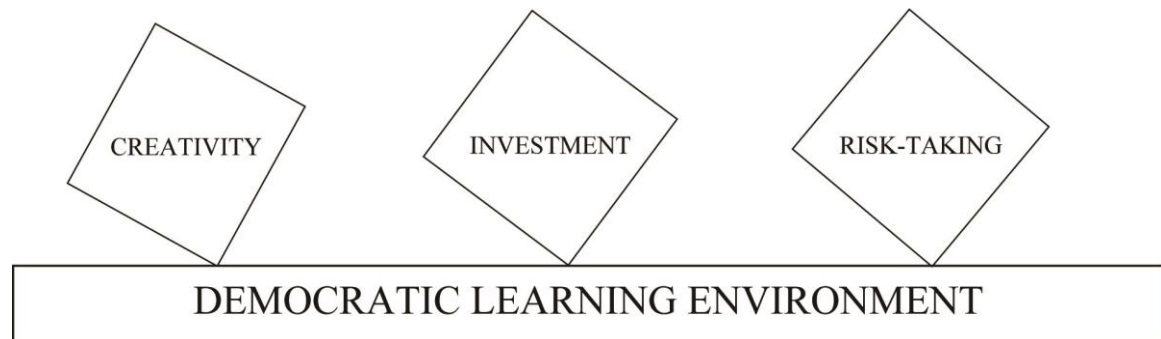
Figure 3. Subcategories 2

3.3.1 Creativity

Students would often alter an assignment or plan at any given time. This would occur spontaneously as the dialogue amongst the participants had become fluid. They were very comfortable to express a new idea to improve a lesson or express displeasure on a given topic. I did not sense students being hesitant to share thoughts as I had in the beginning. There seemed to be no fear of reprisal. Moreover, I would join in at times and make suggestions about ideas that I had. Then we would tweak these together. This environment promoted a free exchange and was supportive of participant thoughts that supplemented creativity.

When prompted to explain the development of more creative assignments, one student responded, "I feel as though I was more comfortable, because I was interested in the assignment. We chose to do it, so I think there was a feeling of accomplishment we all wanted" (Reflection Two, Question Seven, December 2012).

This demonstrates that students not only became increasingly comfortable with less traditional assignments, but that they were also more willing to take risks.

3.3.2 Risk-taking

When asked to explain the increased willingness of the class to engage in more challenging assignments as designed by the students, one participant responded, "we're like making the plans and stuff so it was like if it was pressure it was our own faults we made it" (Focus Group One, Participant Group One, Lines, 212-213, October 2012). This reinforces the importance of self-choice. Over the twelve weeks, students consistently emphasized that their efforts changed when they were allowed to make their own decisions. The recurrent theme regarding completion of assignments was the association to self-choice. The students chose the work and due dates as opposed to being instructed to do so.

Moreover, as students became more confident with the process of developing and completing assignments, they were also more willing to take risks and create non-traditional assignments. Choosing to read an autobiography is an example. My suggestion for an assessment of the book comprised of discussion questions to be completed as a formal document, but the students suggested that formal letters to the author be written, as they were learning the skill in another class. They also suggested that each letter include specific criteria, such as an introduction of the student to the author and the impact that the story made on them personally and their education. They also incorporated the principles of my discussion questions as a guide for the content of the letters. The following excerpt validates this shift to risk-taking:

"Student: We were more adventurous.

Satterfield: You became adventurous through the process?

Student: I thought we learned our limitations to begin with so then we pushed through them" (Focus Group Two, Participant Group Two, Lines, 227-233, December 2012).

Considering that a primary goal of this study was to explore how collaborative lesson planning would occur in a high stakes environment, the emergence of increased creativity and risk-taking took me by surprise. It was exhilarating to hear students say that they became more "adventurous" in their education. This, in turn, led to an increased sense of investment on the part of the students.

3.3.3 Investment

During the study and later analysis, I perceived that students became more invested not only in the collaboration as a class activity, but in their assignments as well. This was very prevalent near the end of the study when the classroom developed a democratic atmosphere. I probed the students about my observations and include the following responses:

"Student: I normally can't get through the first chapter of any book and this time I could actually get through it and I finished the whole book.

Satterfield: Why do you think you were so willing to step out and do the letters?

Student: Because we wanted to be more in it I guess, we wanted to see what he had to say about it; so more of his own personal perspective of everything. We wanted to know more" (Focus Group Two, Participant Group One, Lines 96-109, December 2012).

Therefore, I assert that student participation in learning and teaching as a democratic process encouraged executive management. Moreover, students became active agents in their learning and the result increased creativity, investment and risk-taking. While these positive shifts occurred, the experience was not without challenges.

3.4 Challenges

Although I felt this intervention was an overall positive experience for the participants, many of the examples from the data also demonstrate frustrations associated to the high stakes nature of this course. As stated, the overall experience was positive, but the results were influenced by my thorough knowledge of the course requirements and content. I was beginning my fifteenth year of teaching this course.

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Additionally, I have worked for the NYS Department of Education writing the Global History Regents Exams. I am not certain that the experience would have been as positive without this expertise. For example,

"I have practically abandoned the goal setting and using standards in the lessons. This is where I find that my teacher knowledge is put to use. I know when lessons meet standards and goals. This is too cumbersome and takes much practice to do with students in 40-minute class sessions. After completing the lessons, I show students how they apply. When we develop a list of activities I know that they all apply and change" (Field Notes, 10/10/12).

Also, this study was conducted during the first semester of the academic year. When review of the course and exam preparation takes place in the second semester, I would not have been able to maintain this method. Moreover, my own job requirements with regard to the APPR and administrative responsibilities posed challenges and caused a great deal of anxiety. Any teacher can attest to the extensive time required for meetings, record-keeping, and administrative paperwork.

3.5 Impact on the Participants

In the final focus group, I asked the students to summarize this collaborative learning experience in a word or a phrase. The following are some of their comments:

"increased scores on all work; better grades; challenging; enlightening; more cooperative   for students; interesting to see how the students actually put more effort in;

Insightful; Enjoyable; Inspiring; Worthwhile; Engaging; Alright; How much we have learned" (Focus Group Two, 12/3/12).

While these comments demonstrate the positive nature of the experience for most of the participants, I again emphasize that the success of this collaborative venture began when the students allowed themselves to trust one another. As the levels of trust increased, the participants were empowered to design more creative ways of learning. Likewise, the students were empowered as insiders to the designs of their own learning and the regulations of the policies imposed upon them. I attribute the insider knowledge to much of the empowerment that students developed as they explored their perceptions of teaching and learning, and the changing dynamics of the relationships amongst the participants. Moreover, this environment contributed to an increased rapport with one another, and a willingness to communicate more openly with me. Even when the study concluded, these characteristics remained amongst this group. They openly offered suggestions regarding deadlines, assistance, and their thoughts on any given assignments. Furthermore, they were much more confident in their knowledge of the curriculum and standards. Additionally, I have a closer relationship with these students than with any of my other five sections of global history. Dewey (1938) spoke of teaching as a dynamic continuum in that the teacher affects the future experiences of students. In many ways, this study has reinforced this concept for me.

3.6 Impact on My Practice: Re-centering

"Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase". Martin Luther King, Jr.

This quote adequately describes my feelings when the study began. While I have presented the student empowerment that developed, I too, felt a sense of empowerment when I relinquished control of the class. I have realized after all, that the student should be the central factor in learning, not me. This empowered me not only to trust the students, but myself as well.

Re-centering the focus of the learning process to the comfort of my students has impacted my methods. In doing so, seeking the student perspective has become a part of my practice that will continue to contribute to more meaningful learning experiences. I accept that collaborative ventures are daunting when teaching a high stakes course. While I feel a great deal of pressure to adequately prepare students for an exam that can determine their ability to graduate, I have learned that my students feel as much pressure, or more, than I do. As such, they worked hard to cover necessary content and were diligent when preparing quality lessons. I have realized that allowing the students to control some measure of their learning didn't mean that I was out of control. My knowledge and experience was necessary to ensure the success of this study and student preparation. I realized, what's the worst that can happen? If it's not working, we can stop and fix it.

3.7 Students Are a Valuable Resource

When reviewing the data, I noticed that time was a significant concern. It emerged in the reflections of both the participants and me. However, the students became proficient and confident in their lesson planning by the second attempt in the first research cycle, roughly three weeks after the beginning of the school year. The lessons they designed at that point were not only more meaningful, but they could produce lessons in a 20-minute time span that would take me two or more hours. Furthermore, they were more invested in these lessons. Also, the activities provided new ideas for me to use in other classes, and I gained valuable insight regarding their preferences and styles. In these ways, the students became a valuable resource for me to add to my repertoire of methods. They also served as a support group to deal with the pressures in a high stakes environment.

4. Implications

Despite the challenges of the study, I contend that the findings can contribute to the literature for practitioners who work within the confines of high stakes environments. Also, the findings could add to the literature regarding collaborative studies.

To begin, there is a gap in the literature. Few studies present examples of collaboration between teachers and secondary students and no studies were found that allowed students to design their own lesson plans. Additionally, I found no existing literature in which these interventions were attempted in a high stakes environment. Therefore, this may be the first documented attempt to implement teacher-student collaborative lesson planning at the high school level in a high stakes environment and that aligns to the CCSS. Moreover, this study hopes to provide tools and methods to teachers who seek

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to implement authentic and meaningful learning activities. The dynamics of power shifted when I became a participant in the collaboration. This created a space for students to truly be at the center of the learning environment that empowered the students and me. Using the students as a resource to design activities and lessons, not only resulted in more meaningful learning and engagement of all students, it also allowed time to observe classroom interactions and develop a deeper sense of rapport with my students. Moreover, the students designed creative lessons that I would not have considered otherwise. All of these areas have implications for teacher preparation programs as well as potential training and professional development for new and veteran teachers.

Moreover, the findings of this study assist the generation of theory that could ultimately enrich the broader research community. Social constructivist learning theorists purport that knowledge is built by the learner, not supplied by the teacher (Papert & Harel, 1991, p. 518). Authentic learning is grounded in constructivist theory. Active participation in one's education contributes to authentic and meaningful learning. Therefore, students may tend to acquire more sustainable knowledge when they actively participate to create activities that are meaningful to themselves or their peers (Papert, 1993).

4.1 Future Research and Contributions to the Field

The findings of this study reveal that collaborative lesson planning can help many students experience a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their educational lives. It serves to illustrate some ways in which student-centered collaboration can increase student participation and engagement in an era of increasingly high stakes, standards-based curricula.

Another benefit of this method involves the ability for practitioners to reflect upon and positively impact their practice. Seeking to understand learning through the perspectives of one's students can expand a teacher's repertoire of teaching and learning strategies and revitalize her professional life.

I encourage teachers, who have become frustrated with the demands standards-based courses and high stakes testing, to consider this approach as a whole or in part.

Despite limitations, the findings from this study contribute to the literature on increasing student participation and authentic learning practices while aligning to mandated standards, in a number of complementary ways.

5. Final Thoughts

"It feels more like I guess I don't know how to put it. Kinda like a family. It doesn't really feel like we're really like being talked down and we do not have to do every little thing possible. Like school. It's more like we are actually communicating more. Therapy" (Focus Group 1, Lines 261-264).

Making a positive impact on the lives of young people during the transitional teen stage is rewarding and gives purpose to my life. That is sometimes difficult to convey to people who criticize educators. However, when I review the transcript of the focus group and came across the selection above, I felt rewarded in an emotional way that I cannot describe. Her words struck me because I realized that we did sort of feel like a family.

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I am passionate about finding ways to engage my students to be more vested in their education. While I still struggle with state and federal requirements in that I am aware of the enormity of pressure that they place on my students, teachers, and parents, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to conduct this study to seek ways that might make that pressure more manageable.

As supported by social learning theory, I found that real learning is a relationship-based experience. The social and democratic nature of this study allowed students to explore their perceptions of teaching, learning, and redefinition of roles. This empowered them to become more creative and adventurous in their learning. It also enlightened them to the educational policies that often limit creativity. As demonstrated by the work of Freire, participatory action research has the propensity to engage participants in social critique and social action (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The participants in this study have developed strong opinions on educational policies and the CCSS. I believe that they will continue to be informed on these topics and advocate for themselves.

This study's ultimate value lies in its ability to explore the feasibility and practicality of executing meaningful and authentic strategies within the confines of a high-stakes high school global history course. The experience has energized my professional practice and has inspired me to find ways to influence educational policies.

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