I want to thank the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Paul Thomas, the Award panel, TARS and the student's and colleagues who originally nominated me for the VC’s Teaching Award for 2007. It is a great privilege. I should also like to acknowledge the support of my Dean, Head of School and colleagues in the School of Social Sciences for providing the conditions conducive to a marvellous teaching experience, which for me remains a very great adventure here at USC.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt once said on receiving awards that the less said about the recipient’s achievements the better, and that such occasions are best spent addressing ourselves to the world, to issues at hand. You will be relieved to hear that I’m taking her advice – the issue at hand today being the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

You will also appreciate – sympathetically I hope – that in 15 minutes I cannot prove an argument. Indeed, I shall struggle simply try to make what I say coherent. My topic is the relationship between Learning, Teaching and Democracy. What I’m suggesting is that there is an intrinsic relationship between democracy and education. More specifically I’m suggesting that many of the civil and civic habits, the “trace elements” necessary for democracy to work, can be found in an incipient form in the good tutorial.

I’m heartened to find confirmation for this suggestion in a recent article in the Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (August 2006), by Caroline Kreber from the University of the Edinburgh, who says that the SoLT is not just about which teaching strategies to produce the most effective learning outcomes. On the contrary, the SoLT must constantly question the outcomes or purposes of University learning. “Best teaching practices,”
Kreber argues, cannot be understood without reference to the purposes which the University serves through its teaching and curriculum. In particular, Kreber recommends that the SoLT needs to rigorously reflect upon the role that University teaching does (or doesn’t) play in cultivating citizenship and democracy.

Since the 1980’s there has been a debate in North America about the relationship between democracy and education. This discussion finds echoes here in Australia but has not been as lively to date. Most participants in this debate assume that there is a relationship between democracy and education but approach it differently. One exception is the Literary Theorist, Stanley Fish, who argues that there is a vast gulf between academic and partisan political endeavours; that the task of character formation is best left to other (unspecified) institutions and that the University’s concern is solely with seeking and disseminating “truth”. He also advises us to tell outsiders like politicians, corporations, parents and donors to “wrack off” if they don’t like what we do!

I confess a nostalgic sympathy for Fish’s viewpoint but it belongs to the world of an Ivory Tower that has long been lost or more probably, never was. It also underestimates the role of Fish’s own work, as a great public intellectual, in cultivating democratic sentiments.

The contemporary University is constantly reminded that it is part of the ‘real world’. What this usually means, though, is that we are part of the global market-place in which large, private, corporations rule and education is a valuable commodity. Accordingly, we are told to adopt corporate practices of governance, management and accountability or perish. At this point, I will vent just one instance of sociological spleen by suggesting that the real world is not just a commodity market but a society. This is not an attack on markets but simply to point out (1) that contrary to Fish’s nostalgia our Universities do
in fact serve extra-academic purposes and add (2) that the real world is far richer and more complex than the market paradigm. Our world, our society is many things; a diverse, dynamic, fluid and unequal array of groupings and identities. However, despite this diversity most people in Australian society, when pressed to answer, want us to be a democracy in some form.

Democracy is a highly contested concept but its etymology is clear, the *Kratos* of the *Demos*, the ‘rule’ or ‘power’ of the ‘people’: the idea that people can govern themselves both individually and collectively. John Dewey said democracy is not so much a mode of government as “a mode of associated living”. When most Australians think of democracy, though, they probably think in terms of party politics and voting for leaders in elections. In other words, democracy is viewed as a procedure but not an end in itself. This is what Benjamin Barber calls “thin democracy”; it is liberal democracy reduced to its lowest common denominator; whereby we only exercise self-government once every three or four years in the three minutes it takes to fill in a ballot paper and deposit it in the ballot box. (At this level, the debates about democracy and education are usually about the teaching of civics – an important issue that we are still struggling with).

Barber, amongst many others, says we can do better than ‘thin democracy’ – that if we want fulfilling lives and creative workplaces we have to turn representative government into self-government by the community that we are part of. Barber calls this active engagement in the government of ourselves; “strong democracy”. This is democracy as a way of life, where we consciously seek to share power between people in all spheres and encourage others to do likewise. Deep democracy means acknowledging that our political and representative institutions depend upon a democratic culture in civil society. Without such a culture, these institutions risk becoming empty forms with weak foundations and the potential for arbitrary power increases. So, the connection between democracy and education at this level is not so much to
do with procedures but more with values, habits and shared social practices that are conducive to both.

Let me highlight just three pedagogical practices that many of us strive to cultivate in our tutorials that are simultaneously pre-requisites for strong democracy. At the risk of over-simplification these practices include (1) informed deliberation, (2) inclusive participation and (3) critical dialogue.

The contemporary German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, (who grew up under Nazism) advocates informed deliberation as the key to democracy. It involves all participants being able to express opinions on the basis of the available evidence and to negotiate criteria for the adjudication of arguments without fear of sanctions, such as reprimand, expulsion, job-loss or imprisonment. It assumes a communal interest in seeking truth and that this takes precedence over power or vested interests. Indeed transparent deliberation is an antidote to the latter because it unmaps distortions and requires justifications from power.

The tutorial is a site for informed deliberation. We expect our students to be informed, at least to the extent that they have done the set reading (hopefully more). Once conversation is initiated it requires people to supply reasons for their opinions and enables others to question these. In this process, there is no place for manipulation or deception, aimed simply at winning an argument. Informed deliberation encourages our students to spot shonky or superficial solutions to problems. We encourage informed deliberation when we make the tutorial a safe place in which to dissent. It also assumes, somewhat idealistically, that we are capable of an unforced consensus about the problems we confront; that once we know the weight of evidence about a situation like global warming, racism or market failure, then there is an implicit expectation to deliberate on how to redress these situations. This may seem utopian but there are a lot of education researchers who think it is at least
possible and I have seen many examples in my own class-room of apparent consensus being reached as a result of discussion (although, there can be no guarantees that it will happen).

The late Greco-French philosopher, Cornelius Castoriadis, in contrast to Habermas argues that deliberation is a necessary but insufficient basis for democracy. We can deliberate “until the cows come home” but without our active participation, nothing will change. Democracy for Castoriadis is essentially the inclusive and equal participation of everyone in making the decisions which affect them. In this, he is heir to the direct democracy of the ancient Athenians. This participatory ideal, says Castoriadis, will only work if it is inclusive of diversity. That is, if it enfranchises all of its diverse participants as equals. We have to learn argues Castoriadis that our own autonomy or identity is viable only to the extent that we can enable and respect the autonomy of the other. If I can arbitrarily restrict or impose on the autonomy of another, then my own is endangered.

In the tutorial, the inclusive and participatory ideals of Castoriadis have many pedagogic applications. Most of us appreciate the value of inclusive learning strategies based on values of equality and recognition to provide all of our students the opportunity to learn regardless of background.

There is also a growing body of evidence that collaborative and/or cooperative learning strategies are producing better results for learning higher-order thinking skills than the solo-learner strategies. Learning like democracy, is a profoundly social and not simply a cognitive activity. There is also a paradoxical recognition that the self-directed, individual learner thrives best when linked to supportive networks with whom they share common tasks and can depend on in the co-construction of knowledge. This supports Castoriadis’s contention that individual self-determination is enriched and not
diminished by social participation. Democracy also, like learning, requires socially responsive, not atomised, individuals.

Another deceased philosopher, Hans Georg Gadamer, highlighted that neither deliberation nor participation can occur without dialogue. A dialogue is not just any old conversation and it is not the sort of dialogue conducted by Plato, where he already knew the answers and led the hapless disciple to those answers through a series of interrogative questions. A dialogue for Gadamer is the sort of conversation where, conscious of our own prejudices, we initially suspend judgement and open ourselves to another’s point of view by actively listening. He says ‘Such an opening does not entail agreement but rather the to-and-fro play of dialogue’ (op cit). We seek to discover other peoples’ standpoint and horizon. By so doing their ideas become intelligible, without our necessarily having to agree with them (Gadamer 1979: 270). Dialogue necessitates “active listening”. In the end, we may still only agree to disagree but at least we will have a better appreciation of why this is. In genuine dialogue we have to be prepared to lay our prejudices on the line and allow for the possibility that the other might be right and we may be wrong. In our nation’s politics there is far too little dialogue of this sort with its “winner takes all” mentality but there is hope in the tutorial.

Interestingly, I have found that there are leading scientists and management theorists who concur with Gadamer on how learning is fundamentally dialogical. These include the Quantum Physicist David Bohm and the organisational theorist, Peter Senge, author of The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation, who each saw dialogue as central to scientific and business success.

I have never seen a tutorial prosper without dialogue! As with deliberation and participation, it only works if the participants treat each other as equals. It cultivates such habits as listening to the other before stating one’s own
opinion, being reflective about one's own assumptions and being open to new possibilities emerging from the dialogue that one hadn't considered before. In a true dialogue, the teacher learns too. The educator, Nicholas Burbules says dialogue “is not so much a specific communicative form, but rather “a kind of social relation that engages its participants”” (Burbules 1993: 19) and can transform them. It also entails virtues and emotions such as concern, trust, respect, appreciation, affection and hope (ibid: 36-46). These everyday virtues in turn sustain wider networks of social trust, extending beyond family and friends, which Charles Tilley says is a prerequisite for modern democracy.

I could go on to list many other qualities of the good tutorial that form the substratum of democratic practice but in view of the time I will leave it there.

May I conclude by noting that there is a sizeable gulf between what happens in the best tutorials and what many people experience in their normal working lives? Standard corporate practice, with a few notable exceptions, is all about top-down decision-making and compliant employees fitting into a vision they have played no part in creating. Institutions driven by such practices, prize only the market values of efficiency, labour flexibility and the “bottom line”, often at the expense of vital democratic practices like informed deliberation, inclusive participation and dialogue. One challenge for us in University learning and teaching is to reflect on how we might contribute to bridging this gulf? – Thank You.

FURTHER READING

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