The Impacts of Democratic Learning Environment on Students' Self-Enhancement: A Case Study in a Malaysian Public University

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Abstract: An educational institution is one of the places where students can work on their self-enhancement. This is because an educational institution is more than just a place to gain knowledge; it is also a place to grow as an individual holistically. This study explored to what extent a democratic learning environment can impact students' self-enhancement. For this purpose, the study adopted a qualitative study with a case study as the research design. Using semi-structured interviews, six participants who had experienced the democratic classroom approach in their courses were involved. The data from the interviews were then analysed using thematic analysis. Three major themes were drawn from the interviews of the participants. The findings of the study showed that when the students experienced a democratic classroom approach in their courses, they felt appreciated, and their sense of confidence and belonging increased. Therefore, the study suggests that educators need to know how to foster students' self-enhancement to improve their well-being while engaging in teaching and learning activities.

Keywords: Democratic Learning Environment, Self-Enhancement, Student Empowerment, Teaching and Learning, Qualitative Study.

1.   Introduction

It is crucial for an individual to not only expand his or her cognitive ability at school. The learning environment in a classroom should be one of the important aspects of a student's academic life. The classroom also contributes to a student's cognitive, social, and moral self-enhancement instead of simply emphasising on knowledge gain (Rusticus, Pashootan, & Mah, 2022; Kamisah, Nur Asmaliza & Asmidar, 2022). In addition, the educator is responsible for establishing a good learning environment that incorporates elements of caring and supportive classroom community (Nor Sa'adah, Suhaida, Siti Noormi, & Arnida, 2021). The learning environment should be a place where students are able to improve themselves, and it is closely related to the pedagogy chosen by the educator. This is because the educator is capable of planning the creation of a suitable learning environment in the classroom. Hence, to be able to establish this kind of learning environment, the educator needs to think of the best

approach that allows students to have more chances in expressing themselves and assists them to develop their self-enhancement. Democratic learning environment can be one of the best strategies to be implemented in order to assist students in enhancing their psycho-social well-being. A democratic classroom is one that provides students care and freedom while learning. They are given the chance to be involved actively in their own learning process. So, in a democratic classroom, educators should serve as the facilitator to students in their learning. When students are given the freedom to construct their own learning according to their own preference, they can express more in terms of their intellectual and psycho-social well-being. Certainly, the democratic classroom has its own set of principles, which is a mutual agreement between the educator and the students. When all parties in the classroom community reach a mutual agreement, a harmonious learning environment is created (Howson, Kinchin, & Gravett, 2021; Andolina & Conklin, 2021; Ovens & Lynch, 2019). Everyone is given the chance to talk freely, to be heard, to respect each other, to establish positive relationships among the classroom community, and to believe in their ability to make decisions. Students who are exposed to the democratic classroom approach experience a student-centered learning environment where they are welcome to discuss, argue, and give opinions about various issues raised in the classroom, which consequently liberates themselves during a lesson. When students are encouraged to be themselves during the lesson, they become confident, know how to dispute politely, and it helps in their self-growth as well.

However, some students face difficulties with positive self-enhancement, which leads to issues like academic achievement, low self-worth, inability to establish positive relationships with peers, including negative thoughts and wrong perceptions of the classroom community (Asma, Hazalizah, & Fatanah, 2020; Amar Hisham, Rajadurai, Hazril Izwar, & Sadiq, 2019; Kotera & Ting, 2019).

John Dewey, a key person in progressive education, concurred that educational curriculum should place an emphasis on students' different abilities and interests. Furthermore, when educators recognise the difference in students' abilities and interests, educators can create a classroom environment accordingly where students can obtain essentials skills, for instance, cooperating in a harmonious way, learning to trust and respect their classmates, as well as tolerating disagreements among themselves (Haynes & Chaltain, 2004). Thus, students should exhibit what they have learnt in their daily activities.

A democratic environment is needed to establish democratic traditions. "Democracy cannot be mass delivered to classrooms but must emerge in the classroom and develop from classroom to classroom" (Knight, 2001; p. 251). For a classroom to be democratic, Kesici (2008) claimed that students must be given the opportunity to openly express their thoughts and discuss freely. That means it is essential to ensure that the classroom climate is safe for students to be 'free' in their discourse (Kesici, 2008). The best learning environment can be achieved if the domain provides: 1) encouragement to risk opinions and challenge authority; 2) relief from unnecessary pain and public humiliation, including boredom and loneliness; 3) meaning; 4) a sense of competence; 5) a feeling of belonging; 6) awareness of one's usefulness; 7) excitement; 8) creativity; 9) ownership; and 10) equality. Democratic education ought to have these together in a sound and cohesive approach in teaching and learning (Knight, 2001).

Students learn in different learning styles that are more persistent and appropriate to live when they are allowed to be part of the process in becoming stakeholders. Consequently, democratic classrooms can make students develop a sense of ownership that comes with being a stakeholder in their learning sessions. The democratic classroom recommends that learning is mutually constructed by both the teacher and the students. This implies that the classroom will not have a one-way dialogue from the teacher to the students. Instead, it gives the students their rights and encourage them to contribute in decision-making of the teaching and learning process (Muhammad Thoyibi, Mauly, & Aryati, 2021)

Students need to experience classroom environment that supports their growth, particularly in terms of personality. This can be a reality if they can create a classroom environment where they are engaged in the teaching and learning process. Apart from this, an educational institution should not just be a place where students only receive knowledge; rather, it should be a place where it is a learning environment that makes them feel accepted and supported to practise their knowledge accordingly.

Since students have diverse abilities, skills, and interests that are evident in the classroom, they need to know and learn how to properly interact with each other. This is where they can learn to have a

sense of belonging and develop trust with one another. They can also learn how to enhance their self-growth with the diversity in their classroom. Democratic classroom is a place where they can do these things with their classmates. This is so that the students feel encouraged to be active learners and also in making their own decisions. Not only that, they are also taught to be responsible of their decisions and their own learning. Hence, the educator acts as a facilitator who monitors the students' learning activities. This kind of learning environment helps to develop students' personality because they feel respected and cared by the classroom community who are their peers and educator (Lipton & Oakes, 2003). In contrast, the traditional learning environment discourages active participation in the classroom where students passively listen to the educator's lesson without any argument or discussion. Therefore, according to Bafile (2005), students love to be given the chance to decide for themselves and to share their own thoughts through discussions in a safe and cooperative classroom environment.

A democratic classroom encourages and gives students the chance for self-growth. It is because the classroom environment also gives space for the educator to establish a supportive and thoughtful learning environment where students feel safe and comfortable to share their abilities. Additionally, students are unrestricted in showing their creativity freely (Hall & Barrett, 2000; Pryor, 2004). Fisher (1994) too mentioned that in the process of teaching and learning, there ought to be a reliance on discussion, cooperation, and dialogue. Thus, it is crucial for both students and educator to have mutual love, respect, and shared responsibility for each other (Mulji, 2004). It is the responsibility of the educator to establish a learning environment where students can develop their own self-esteem through discussions of their own ideas. This is where the students become active learners and help each other in the classroom.

Therefore, the classroom ought to be a medium where students are able to foster a sense of belonging with their fellow classmates. Students also need to be conscious with the norms of the classroom and feel at ease, as well as comfortable in sharing their own feelings and thoughts. In addition, students can obtain knowledge in a better way when there are discussions in the classroom. In a democratic classroom, the educator acts as a facilitator to help students learn. Therefore, this type of learning environment greatly benefits students in terms of developing their self-growth (Imran, 2006; Bafile, 2005; Abbas, 2002).

Hasbollah (2020) stated that to develop a first-class society with a first-class mind set, students should be given the opportunity to experience a democratic learning environment, especially in higher learning institutions. In a democratic learning environment, students will be trained to think critically and develop maturity in giving ideas, especially in discussions. On the other hand, educators exhort students to extend rather than confine their ideas. By having this method and style of learning, students will have the opportunity to assess their receptiveness to specific issues through effective argumentation supported by facts and research during classroom discussions. The outcome of a democratic learning environment practice will support students and be able to produce quality students with high leadership skills through having effective communication skills and emotionally intelligent working across cultures, including high self-growth, as well as being a socially responsible person, resilient, and competitive, yet respect others, as discussed critically in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025.

2.   Constructivism and Learning

Constructivism is a philosophical framework that highlights how individuals personally develop their own understanding of reality through cognitive engagement. This paradigm is based on the works of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky's social constructivism emphasizes the value of social and cultural context in which learning occurs and how the context and setting affect learners (Do, Do, Nguyen, 2023). Vygotsky's social constructivism highlights the role of teachers to scaffold learners moving away from teacher-centred learning. Therefore, the constructivist learning approach revolves around activities, methods and a classroom environment that include students in constructing meaning and knowledge while teachers guide students rather than solely deliver information (Zajda, 2011; Pan, Hung, Bai, 2023).

Within the constructivist approach to learning is the Constructivist Learning Environment (CLE) which promotes and applies a democratic learning environment (Golder, 2018). CLE is a student-centred learning approach where students are encouraged to express their own opinions and their needs related to learning. It fosters independent learning with negotiated learning strategies as students can

request for activities, make decisions, and have discussions with the teacher and classmates. Therefore, this study delves into the intricate dynamics of a democratic learning environment within the framework of Collaborative Learning Environment (CLE) and looks at how it impacts students' self-enhancement.

3.   Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing the case study method. Yin (2003) claimed that the case study method is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p.16), which is in line with the researcher's true interests in learning more in-depth about the phenomenon in the real context.

A semi-structured interview was the primary data source that provided evidence for this research. At the same time, a journal review was selected as the supplementary source to support the primary data obtained from the interviews. The researcher also used several video recordings from observations to obtain an overall view of the classroom sessions. The lecturers' field notes were a useful addition to complement the video recordings of the observation. These methods and instruments were chosen to gather the data so that they could supplement each other. These types of data collection are prevalent for qualitative studies (Anderson, 2010).

In this study, two sources of journals were used. The first one was the researcher's daily journal because the researcher herself participated in the research as the participants' teacher. The researcher wrote reflective journals after she conducted the teaching session. Besides, she would take field notes during the class break. The second journal documentation was from students who expressed their feelings and experiences regarding the democratic classroom approach. Twenty-seven students were willing to share their journals. They submitted their journals after participating in the researcher's democratic environment classroom. Apparently, many of them were comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings through writing because most were not comfortable of doing so through interviews. The researcher used this journal documentation for data triangulation that was obtained from individual interviews.

Regarding this study, the classroom setting consisted of 27 students, 11 males and 16 females pursuing their Bachelor of Education study, specialising in Guidance and Counselling in Johor Bharu. The classroom seating arrangement was set by the researcher in the form of a semi-circle. The seating arrangement was intended to create a more conducive classroom environment for a democratic classroom that is different from the traditional teaching approach where the students sit in rows facing the teacher. The semi-circle arrangement was set in such a way so that each student felt unique as they looked at each other and perceived themselves as equals to everyone. In the classroom, the researcher used the democratic classroom approach design tailored to the Malaysian context. Students who were involved in the teaching and learning in a democratic classroom environment engaged in learning activities like arguing, questioning, exchanging ideas, having mutual respect, and writing reflective journals after each lesson.

Six students volunteered to be interviewed by the researcher using the semi-structured format. All participants were studying for their Bachelor's degree in Education (Guidance and Counselling). The criteria for their selection were based on their experience of the democratic classroom approach in one of their courses, Methods of Teaching Moral Education. The interviews were audio-recorded. To ensure ethical consideration, the participants were briefed about the study before they gave informed consent to be involved in it. They were also assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality. After the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed. The transcriptions of the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

4.   Findings

Three themes were generated from the participants' interviews. The themes were 1) feeling appreciated, 2) confidence level enhanced, and 3) sense of belonging.

Theme 1: Feeling appreciated

One of the main themes was regarding the impact of a democratic classroom towards their self-growth of feeling appreciated. During the interview, the participants agreed that when they experienced

the democratic classroom approach, they felt appreciated. When their classmates listened to and accepted their opinions, they felt that they were acknowledged. These made the students feel appreciated and they valued themselves much more. One of the participants commented:

> Ahh...i felt welcomed or in other words like being appreciated. (Elmyra, DU 116).

> Although my point of view might not sound logic for others, but when I talked and being appreciated so much so that it is a huge benefit for me. (Elmyra, DU 118).

Based on the aforementioned quotes, Elmyra expressed that she felt more valuable as a result of the democratic classroom approach. She felt that her words were being heard and appreciated when she spoke her mind during the learning session as everyone paid attention to her. This gave her the courage to become a better person in terms of improving her self-growth.

This is corroborated by one of the assertions made in a journal by another student, who acknowledged that the teacher also played an important role in advocating students to embrace themselves through class discussions. She further wrote, "This makes student feels appreciated. The teacher acknowledges each opinion given by students. It also makes me feel more confident to speak up in the classroom" (RFAJ01). Another student wrote, "This teaching method makes the student feel more appreciated by the teacher and overcome the fear and shy to talk" (NHFJ01).

During the teaching session, the lecturer made an attempt to establish a democratic environment by asking a question as follows:

> Moral Education covered the universal values without differentiating religions and race, so why do we need the subject of Akhlaq in our Islamic education? Is it not redundant with what we already have in the Moral Education syllabus? (The lecturer).

The students were taken aback by the lecturer's question, and prompted them to go quiet. After a while, a student (SHF02) raised her hand and said:

> I disagree with your statement, madam. Because in my humble opinion, Akhlaq and Moral might generally have the same concept, but I am looking at the perspective of the goals of having good akhlaq (manner) and having good morals is different. As a Muslim, when we portray good Akhlaq, we get the reward (Pahala), mardhatillah. Otherwise, when we practise good morals, we satisfied others who are living surrounding us, such as friends, community, family, and others.

After the lecturer heard the answer, she asked the classroom again, "Does everyone agree with what SHF02 has said?" The lecturer took another initiative by asking another question to trigger her students to speak. After repeating the question, she could see that some nodded their heads while a few just stared at her. Suddenly, another student spoke up:

> I agree with SHF02 because we as Muslims are encouraged to follow the Sunnah, but what you also said true as humans we might share the same values with everyone, but in the aspect of religious practice, the end of applying good moral values is different (MRM01).

The lecturer was a bit pleased because her probing question received responses from the students. She made sure to praise those who spoke up because she wanted them to feel appreciated when they made an effort to voice their opinions and participate in the class. She even told the students that they were all welcome to ask and answer any questions during her class to the point that they agree to disagree with each other's points. Giving them the free rein to speak was what the lecturer wanted so that the students were conscious of what they had learnt.

Theme 2: Enhanced confidence level

The other derived theme was the enhancement of students' confidence level. Most of the participants admitted that their confidence level had increased when they experienced the democratic classroom environment in their learning. They enjoyed it very much when the instructor encouraged them to be active in the classroom, and it gave them the confidence to speak up. One of them said that because of the passive nature of the other classroom environments and their fear of being wrong, they did not feel confident of speaking up in the other classroom. However, in a democratic classroom setting, everyone in the classroom was eager to participate because the instructor did not say that the students were wrong when they expressed their opinions. Instead, the instructor encouraged them to comment or discuss the points raised by other students. They also felt assured that there is no wrong or right when expressing their thoughts.

As Sarah said in her interview:

> I felt more confidence. (Sarah, DU 78). Because of what? Because the lecturer listened to everyone's views without stopping me and others from speaking up. Therefore, I feel so confident to speak up. (DU 322).

It can be seen from the students' journal that they, "feel more confident to speak and feel appreciated and acknowledging when everyone pays attention" (NFFJ01). Student SNFJ01 also mentioned in her journal that "This experience produces the amazing spirit of brave."

Theme 3: Sense of belonging

Having a better sense of belonging was the last theme that emerged from the interviews. The democratic classroom approach made them feel a sense of belonging during the learning session. They were all pleased with the instructor who did not show favouritism to the classroom community. Furthermore, the students did not engage in favouritism among themselves.

Abu shared that he felt a sense of belonging in the classroom where everyone's seating was of the same level. As he commented,

> …the classroom arrangement makes us feel like we are all the same (Abu, DU 37).

This was supported by Ahmad who felt the same way, and that they were close to each other. His excerpt is as follows:

> …the way educator sat and the way others sat makes me feel like we are close. (Ahmad, DU 101).

Thus, all of the participants enjoyed greatly and felt like they belonged in the classroom through the democratic classroom approach.

From the evidence, it can be said that the learning environment of a democratic classroom approach has helped to enhance students' self-growth because they felt more appreciated, their confidence level was also enhanced as they were allowed to express their views during the discussions, and that they have more sense of belonging as they treated each other better than in a non-democratic environment classroom. Kesici (2008) further supported that for a classroom to be democratic, students should be given a chance to express themselves freely, particularly their ideas. This means that seating arrangement is important to ensure that the classroom environment is safe for the students to be 'free' in their discourse. Being 'free' makes them feel safe and comfortable to share their opinions. When the students can express themselves freely, their self-growth will be enhanced as well.

5.   Discussion

A democratic classroom approach impacts students' personal growth positively in a number of ways. In the study, a participant mentioned that she felt appreciated, or in other words, she could feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. She highlighted the term 'huge benefit' because she was given a

chance to be heard, and this made her feel like the classroom community appreciated her. This is in line with what Kesici (2008) claimed: for a classroom to be democratic, students should be given a chance to have their thought in discussions freely. Hence, it is essential to ensure that the classroom climate is safe for students to be 'free' in their discourse. Being 'free' makes the students feel safe and comfortable to share their opinions. A safe feeling while participating in classroom discourse will also provide the students a sense of appreciation.

On another note, building self-confidence was also one of the findings obtained from the interviews and journals of the participants. It was found that the democratic classroom also benefitted the students in terms of their confidence level. Moreover, a student highlighted that her confidence level had increased. Other than that, the role of the instructor who applied the democratic teaching was also crucial. Without support from the teacher, the students may not have been able to express themselves freely, which is when they develop their confidence level. Apart from that, Shor (1992) argued that a teacher should motivate their students to engage in the classroom by 'inviting' them to share their thoughts and contribute to the learning session. When the teacher listens to the students, it opens a broader space for the students to be more confident when sharing their different views and encourages them to contribute fascinating ideas. The students also discovered that they noticed their self-improvement through the democratic classroom approach. Wolk (1998) claimed that democratic classrooms are initiated by teachers who are aware that they are responsible for establishing an environment that allows students and teachers to acquire and inquire about the lesson together as a community in the classroom as critical learners. Thus, it can be concluded that a democratic classroom helps students to develop their own self-growth.

6. Recommendations

Based on the perspective of Malaysian tertiary level students who experienced the democratic classroom approach, the findings revealed that a democratic classroom can empower students in terms of their thoughts and behaviour, as well as enlighten themselves with the lesson in the classroom. The democratic classroom approach implemented in this study as one of the teaching approaches suggests that this kind of teaching approach can be established in Malaysian classrooms. In this study, several characteristics of a democratic classroom environment were observed, such as equality, respect for others, freedom of asking questions, freedom in giving an opinion, self-enhancement, and empowering thoughts. Henceforth, we would like to make some recommendations for further research regarding the implementation of a democratic classroom in Malaysian context. These include:
1. To conduct a comparative study on democratic learning environment approach between Malaysia's private and public universities.
2. To carry out an in-depth study on the role of a democratic learning environment towards students' behaviour, particularly in Malaysian tertiary level classrooms.
3. To quantitatively test the association between democratic learning environment and students' empowerment among tertiary level students in Malaysia.

This study recommends that educators must make sure that the learning environment has an impact on students' development. Self-growth development is very important as it has a strong connection with the emotional and spiritual aspects of a human being. Therefore, it is crucial to identify a good teaching approach that will help students to flourish. As democratic learning environment is an example of a good teaching approach that allows students to grow positively, thus, the educator may consider applying the approach in the teaching and learning process. Secondly, the study suggests that educators should provide a safe and comfortable learning environment so that students feel at ease to participate actively in classrooms, which leads to their self-growth. This could be achieved if the educators demonstrate effective application of the democratic learning environment in their teaching and learning.

7. Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 carried out the fieldwork, prepared the literature review, and overlooked the writeup of the whole article. Author 2

wrote the research methodology. Author 3 carried out the analysis and interpretation of the results. Author 4 wrote the second sub-topic and checked the paper accordingly.

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