

Shared Governance in an Adult Education Doctoral Program: “Self-Directed Learning meets Democratic Process” – A Delicate Balance of Intent, Implementation, and Impact

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Abstract: This symposium explores the governance component offered within a doctoral program in which students were given the opportunity to engage in collective decision-making through democratic process. Panelists, most of whom were research participants for the dissertation upon which this exploration is based, represent cohort groups from 1996 through 2007.

Introduction and Overview

Diane Novak

Like the study that inspired it, this symposium is not intended to be an exposé, but rather a respectful reflection of “self-directed learning meets democratic process” in an adult education doctoral program. From its inception in 1996, the doctoral program in which the researcher was enrolled from 2004-2007, offered what had come to be called “Governance.” It is a kind of “free space” among the coursework and the dissertation requirements. Within that space, doctoral students are encouraged to engage in deep discussion and democratic process related to taking ownership of one’s individual learning experience through collective decision-making for social justice and positive change.

Practical ways offered regarding how that opportunity might be realized were: navigation of the program in general; negotiation of program curriculum with faculty; and the creation of a collaborative community for learning. And yet the researcher found that halfway through the program, the paradoxes that surfaced in Governance made it more an enigma, the “what” and “how” seeming unclear and the practice becoming strained among cohort members. Deeply held personal views clashed within Governance in such a way that seemed the antithesis of its intent.

During the data analysis of her findings, the researcher discovered that her research participants had observed and experienced similar circumstances during their Governance sessions. With the growing popularity of cohort-based programs as well as the increased interest in shared governance, the delicate balance of the intent, implementation, and impact of Governance for optimal outcomes is a timely issue. Through each one’s historically unique

vantage point, panelists share insights and lessons already learned throughout over a decade of frustrations and possibilities. It is hoped that this symposium may add value to future endeavors in uniting self-directed learning and democratic process in “Governance” spaces, by heightening awareness of the need to encourage building necessary competencies for the “navigation of the program in general; negotiation of program curriculum with faculty; and the creation of a collaborative community for learning” within cohort groups in adult education doctoral programs.

Six of the panelists, who were also research participants for the doctoral dissertation that opened this discourse, “The Gift of Governance: A Space to Ponder and Practice – How Might the Pieces Fit?” by Diane Novak, represent five different cohort groups. The panel also includes one faculty member in the program, who served as primary advisor for the study; and the researcher/author, who has organized the symposium and will serve as moderator.

Some guiding questions may include: How might the intent and implementation of Governance in cohort groups serve to ensure a positive impact on the individual as well as the collective, representing Higher Education to the greater society? Should Governance be offered in an adult education doctoral program at all? If so, should participation be mandatory? And perhaps the question underlying all is: How *does* an individual, as well as a collective participate in an opportunity to experience “...government of the people, by the people, for the people...?”

Trust is Key

Eugene Rinaldi

In 1996 a new adult education doctoral program was launched, in which I enrolled, eager to embark on what I expected and which proved to be a stimulating experience. Coursework and dissertation requirements were challenging and thought-provoking. However, early in the program apparently as a response to strained student-faculty relations, another component was added to the program. Eventually it would be called, “Governance.” Our cohort group was told that Governance would serve as the protocol for negotiating curriculum with faculty as well as a forum for collective decision-making through democratic process. The result was paradoxical in that rather than giving voice and fostering democracy, it created confusion and mistrust.

Because of that “feeling,” what could have been an opportunity seemed more like a punishment, an exercise of power and control by faculty. Trust in the intent of this new protocol, was shaken. From that beginning, a distrust of the faculty’s intent of Governance seemed to overshadow the entire experience. Consequently, sessions were filled with power and control issues between faculty and students as well as among students within the cohort group. Because of my love for deep discussion and democratic process, I endeavored to participate to the best of my ability; however, it was more a burdensome responsibility than a competency-building opportunity. I came to the conclusion that, “Control is a form of oppression no matter how well intentioned.”

The Potential of Governance and the Choice We Made

Nadira K. Charaniya

The process of Governance as experienced by the cohort I was in was rather interesting. Intended to provide students with an opportunity to experience and actualize many of the concepts of democracy and equity taught through the program, Governance brought to my

attention the role of popular choice in the democratic process. The experience provided me with great insight into the role of individual power, group voice, passive resistance and, in some instances, apathy.

Our cohort did not successfully tackle issues of power, race, and social justice, but we did seem to gain a greater awareness of the reality of dealing with their inherent dichotomies. In our response to the invitation to “govern ourselves,” we failed to confront the issues that enable the creation of an environment representative of social justice, equity, and freedom. The cohort’s norms dictated what was acceptable and made little space for disagreement. Many of us chose to accept “groupthink” and to avoid engaging in potentially confrontational discussions about justice and equity for those members who felt differently from what the norm dictated.

Had we made room for confronting and exploring difference, we would have been better for the experience. However, we lacked the competencies. As it stands, we walked away on good terms, but our experience of Governance was superficial at best. The reality is that the context of our governance experience really did not test our boundaries. It was not a life-and-death, survival test and the consequences of inaction and accepting the status quo were relatively mild. It was not *our* chosen context for exploring issues of power or social justice. We were simply concerned with completing our doctoral program.

While the experience of Governance for my cohort members and myself was not quite what was intended by its designers, having the opportunity to confront and be confronted by the requirements of Governance, as part of the design of the program was nonetheless valuable. The inclusion of Governance in the program, forced me to think about what it means to have power or not. Our cohort *chose* to exercise its governance power in small ways but at least it was a choice that we had. The potential for Governance as a democratic process through which to challenge and stretch the status quo certainly existed because of the way in which things were set up; we simply *chose* not to act on that potential!

Define “Democracy!”

Susan Malekpour

My experience with Governance resulted in a view of ‘forced democracy.’ I challenge the idea of democracy since its meaning and application varies for everyone. In my governance group, certain individuals commanded the power and insisted on personal gain over institutional policies. While I concur with cohort members’ and the groups’ participation in the decision making process, I suggest that at the beginning the group dynamics is evaluated to determine what power the group desires or actually has. I felt the demand of “you need to make this decision” was not emancipatory for my group. A few bullies took advantage when I wanted to follow and fulfill the program policies and requirements. Additionally, the issues we needed to make decisions about were unclear. I would recommend that the student Governance advise the faculty and administration about the following topics: curriculum, methods of instruction, degree requirements. This was not an option for our Governance; rather, these important issues were solid and not negotiable. However, issues as detailed as deadlines for assignments were topics of discussion, argument, and frustration. In general, the issues were unclear and personal. We needed faculty guidance on how to address these issues through cooperative decision-making and collective bargaining.

A true democratic process should allow groups to define democracy and identify their desired elements of control. The first question is the evaluation of whether the governance process is needed or wanted by the group. I found the process selfish; everyone chose his/her

own personal agenda over the cohesiveness of the group. However, from conversations with other cohort members, “it was our right to be selfish.” That statement altered my understanding of the process’ purpose. I believe we needed to start with accomplishing the governance mission, purpose, and goals. We should have obtained faculty members’ support in our goals. It should have been at the collegial level and interactive with the administration. I wanted to know what we could bargain about and what the core requirements were. Many times we made a decision, presented it to the faculty member, and heard the response of “Oh, that cannot change! It’s a core requirement.”

Faculty members need to guide the process and clarify boundaries. If guidance is not provided, Governance is at risk. In my governance experience, individuals who felt an expectation would interfere with their personal schedule challenged every rule and policy. We in higher education practice a democratic relationship between faculty members and students. If someone personally wants something, one option is to discuss that with his/her appropriate faculty member and thus, not misuse the governance process. The idea of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach for every cohort and throwing the Governance option to them is not wise. Because of our different perceptions of governance goals, a timely decision was difficult to make as well as frustrating. I had a cohort group that needed guidance. Things that we discussed and argued about were so personal that I chose not to participate in the governance process. When you have to dictate ‘democracy’, the spirit of it gets lost very quickly.

The Lost Weekend

Diana Churchill

As a general rule, I believe in transparency. The lack of transparency between faculty and the cohort group around issues of Governance created needless frustration. I understood that Governance was designed to be a place where the cohort group could make its own decisions without the influence of faculty “power.” However, the truth is, was, and probably always will be that faculty do have the ultimate power in our program. I believe that, by attempting not to “contaminate” Governance, faculty did not share key information with the cohort group.

One memorable weekend we discussed how we could continue our writing and research on the weekend in which the previous cohort group was making their public presentations. If only the faculty had told us that the decision had already been made to use the *entire* weekend for us to be a part of that cohort group’s audience, and that this would be one of our most profitable weekends in terms of understanding research, we would not have wasted our time debating this issue.

Therefore, I would suggest that prior to governance meetings, faculty and students could review a brief agenda, and faculty could let the cohort group know the parameters and limitations that would be placed on its decisions. An emphasis could be put on *practical* shared Governance between the cohort group and faculty.

Our best moments in Governance came toward the end of our program, when we tried to institute changes that would help *future* cohort groups. One example would be a proceedings booklet we prepared for the next cohort group, which described each of our research projects. Also, in our final (dissertation) year, we were able to work more collegially with faculty by scheduling clinics that would help us through that difficult writing phase. Our purpose at that point was clear; whereas earlier, the purpose of Governance had not been clear.

White Male Privilege

Phillip Moulden

Governance made clear to me the different viewpoints that were represented in our cohort along with assumptions about oneself and others based on perceptions formed over a lifetime. I learned to “see” myself as others might and to listen better, to really “hear” the people around me. It was a hard-earned lesson that I had not even realized I needed. It was valuable to me in challenging the barriers to meaningful relationships.

Each semester three of the cohort’s 16 members rotated onto the “Governance Team.” This team was charged with negotiating the learning experiences with the faculty and chairing a cohort group governance session to identify issues and concerns going forward in the program. While serving on that team, I was approached by a faculty member about changing the order of events for that day’s learning experiences. I immediately said “yes” without consulting any of the other “Governance Team” members and the schedule change was implemented. It seemed like a “non-issue” to me and I felt justified and comfortable to exercise autonomy by making a decision I felt was quite simple. However, later in our governance session, I was directly and forcefully criticized, not for the *decision*, but for the *lack of process* that would have allowed “voice” to others in the cohort. Stunned and defensive, I resisted the criticism. I was especially confused by the fact that everyone agreed with the decision and its results. I even wondered if they were simply rejecting my leadership because of who I am and not what I had done. What had seemed to me autonomy in leadership had been to others a manifestation of white male privilege.

It wasn’t until much later through deep reflection that I was able to appreciate that point of view. I came to recognize that by not feeling the need to consult anyone on this decision, I was assuming a right that had not been granted to me by the cohort group I represented. I had only focused on the urgency of the decision being made and not my responsibility to involve others in the decision making process. I have now become more sensitive to the social issues and political climate of any group in which I participate. I monitor my behavior much more closely to avoid being a barrier to the participation of others. While I still make mistakes, I now have a touchstone by which to reflect and evaluate my actions.

I doubt that I would have viscerally learned about white male privilege without this experience. It seems unlikely that I would have another situation, which was safe enough and focused enough on inclusive processes to facilitate this learning. Thus, I support Governance as an ongoing part of graduate education because it increases learning, commitment to process, and deep personal reflection.

Individual Accountability in the Practice of Democratic Process

Jo. D. Kostka

Before entering this adult education doctoral program, which surprisingly offered a governance component, I had a very negative governance experience. Leadership had been abusive and self-serving, so I was very skeptical. However, I decided that “democratic process” was worth my best effort. We, as classmates in the program, were called a “cohort,” a synonym of which is “friend.” “Collaboration,” and “community” were other words associated with the program. And so, I became hopeful. However, in practice, what had promised to be a “safe place,” too often felt like an unfriendly, competitive atmosphere that was the antithesis of friendly community building. Hope gave way to frustration – deep frustration! I did not need the extra pressure of strained relationships; I needed to focus on the coursework and dissertation assignments.

Because I believe that opportunity lies in every challenge, I resolved to turn my frustration into the possibility of sharing the *spirit* behind the *letter* of the “safe place” words. After all, practicing “democratic process” was worth my best effort. I stopped blaming others for what seemed like a failed experiment and endeavored to “be the change” I wanted to see. I assumed leadership roles wherever and whenever I thought I might add value, serving on the Governance team twice with a general commitment to support whatever I perceived was good and positive. By making myself individually accountable, I was able to survive the trials of Governance and become personally strengthened.

Most recently I had the opportunity to sit on an international Board in Haiti. I watched the forming of this Board, which involved four countries with three representatives from each. It was amazing to see Governance in action in the “real world.” I watched intently as some members talked about each other over lunch, debated, and lobbied for their countries’ causes. It took me back to my cohort group’s Governance experience and made me realize how glad I am to have had that “dress rehearsal.” What I did not realize back then is just how well it prepared me for this “real world,” life-changing, changing-lives experience. I do value my growing pains from Governance and wish it had ended on a more positive note; however, that experience planted seeds in all of us, which at some time can help us to deal with difficult situations.

The Elusive Nature of Democracy: Learning to Trust the Process

Elizabeth A. Peterson

It is difficult to re-create a democratic process in higher education when we are used to operating within a larger “democratic” system that requires minimal participation on our part. Democracy as it is practiced in the United States has become so closely connected to our political system that while other opportunities in political and governing, especially *self*-governing activities still exist, fewer and fewer people are taking advantage of them. Is there little wonder then that when doctoral students are asked to create a structure for making collective decisions on behalf of the cohort group, that frustration would be the outcome?

As a member of the faculty I have witnessed three cohorts struggle through the governance process. In all three cases the position most faculty took was that our intervention should be minimal. I have always believed that more faculty involvement is necessary if Governance is going to be successful. As adult educators we must serve as models for our students and demonstrate our commitment to democracy and social change by our willingness to work through the difficult process in which we are requiring the students to engage.

It has been frustrating for me to witness seemingly simple decisions become contentious and lead to disharmony and discontent. I feel much of the frustration could be avoided if we all had the same expectations for the process. It has become very apparent that this is not the case. Some students want Governance to be a safe place to further delve into the material the cohort group has been exposed to, to further discuss dynamics of power and how racism, sexism, ageism, etc., impacts the cohort group. Others just want Governance to be a place where decisions that the faculty has placed before them are made and they don’t want to “waste time” on discussions that don’t lead to a decision. There are some who feel that all decisions should be made by consensus while others feel that majority rule is good enough.

The same lack of understanding I believe exists among the faculty. We need to have a clearer understanding amongst ourselves about the role of the process within the program and if and how Governance supports doctoral study.

The only solution is one that we are now taking. Faculty needs to be brought into the process and we need to be much clearer about what it is we hope the students will gain from the process and help them find ways to work and support one another. For in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt:

“The motivating force of the theory of a Democratic way of life is still a belief that as individuals we live cooperatively, and, to the best of our ability, serve the community in which we live, and that our own success, to be real, must contribute to the success of others.”

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