2.1 Create safe conditions for rigorous learning:
Develop democratic relationships

Essence >

The teacher shares power with students recognising it as a fundamental condition for learning.

Building democracy for more powerful learning networks

One of the challenges for a Year 7 teacher is finding ways to help students really get to know each other beyond their own friendship groups. If we don't address this, friction can spill into the classroom and we may lose the rigorous learning for another day.

I remember one particular group who, from day one, actively avoided any learning interactions with certain other class members. The inflexibility was getting in the way of team learning with and from each other.

I hatched a plan. I announced: 'Next week, everyone will change seats on Friday afternoon ready for the following Monday morning'.

There were lots of nods of approval, until I described the process. Names would be drawn randomly out of a hat in groups of four to form table seating for the following week. The initial groans and complaints were so enormous that it would have been easy at this point to give up, but I stuck with it. I explained that the concept and process were non-negotiable, but the ground rules and expectations needed to be developed collaboratively.

We put our heads together and the collaborative strategies flowed:

- **Suspend judgment**—there would be no responses, verbal or otherwise, as names were drawn.
- **Seek difference**—a redraw would be done if anyone was with more than one person from the previous week's table group.
- **Get to know your group**—we would begin the week with a ten minute table conversation, sharing personal interests, strengths and talents, or responding to a posed question.
- **Be in the moment**—all students would be actively involved in their table group.

To solve the teething problems, we explicitly revisited our ground rules and expectations. By the end of the term we'd established a weekly routine that didn't just run smoothly but was actually embraced enthusiastically by everyone. With these new arrangements came new and powerful learning. Students mixed freely and got to know each other on a new level. By talking and working with every class member, they became more positive and respectful of others in the class. They actively sought out peers, including those they wouldn't have been 'caught dead' talking to before.

Students were discovering what they were all good at and, in the process, they developed a range of ways of thinking. They nominated peers as being skilled in certain areas when others needed help. From this we developed a 'Skills Register' which was posted on the classroom wall; we continually added to it as the year progressed. Rather than coming to me as their first port of call for help, encouragement and feedback, my students were constantly tapping into their own rich source of collective knowledge and skills.

In one of our class meetings we decided to explore new timelines for the seating arrangements. On the last Friday of term we had one mega-draw and organised table group seating for the entire next term. In this way, every student knew what to expect, and who they would be sitting next to and when.

The students weren't the only winners in our new seating arrangements—I learnt powerful lessons as well. I came to understand that when students choose their own classroom seating there's a chance for implied rejection of peers. Choosing not to sit with particular classmates is often deliberate, and a form of harassment.

Sometimes democracy needs a little help—separate the entrenched groups, scaffold their new interactions, and you can empower individuals to develop ways of working with, supporting and learning from *all* learners.

Year 7 teacher

Key actions: Teachers

- Accept my students as individuals, and work in partnership with them to develop class expectations and clarify rights and responsibilities
- Model respect by listening attentively to students and acknowledging alternative perspectives
- Seek students' feedback on my teaching, value their insights and act upon their advice
- Ensure that learners listen to each other and feel safe to voice opinions and challenge thinking
- Structure teamwork where students assume different roles and responsibilities within groups
- Think carefully before overriding class or group agreements
- Explicitly model fair voting processes and avoid bias
- Encourage all to act as leaders, teachers and learners
- Frame classroom conversations to focus on learning, and empower learners to contribute to future directions
- Teach explicit skills and create opportunities for students to chair meetings, negotiate agendas, make decisions and take action
- Help students to eliminate language and actions that make others feel uncomfortable
- Ensure that all individuals' strengths are valued equally
- Intervene strategically to ensure active inclusion (eg routinely adapt classroom seating arrangements to develop students' learning networks)

Key actions: Students

- Strive to be an active class member
- Talk about problems with my teacher rather than being silent
- Think about when to work with others and when to work on my own
- Help others and still focus on my own learning
- Listen to others and give thoughtful feedback to teachers and classmates where I can
- Think about feedback I'm given from classmates and teachers and choose how to use it

I began to grasp that teaching requires a plural pronoun. The best teaching is never so much about 'me' as about 'us'.

Carol Ann Tomlinson

Ways to develop democratic relationships

Shared ownership of routines and systems: It is important for students to feel a sense of control. They need to participate in decision making and know ahead of time what their session/day/week entails, who has responsibility for specific tasks, the work commitments and deadlines, upcoming events and planning schedules. With this 'transparency', everyone understands the context and everyone is accountable. Students share responsibility for notice boards, diaries, storyboards and timetables, and they keep information up to date.

Class agreement: As an introductory activity, use decision-making processes to involve students in listing the attitudes/actions they consider most important for maintaining a productive, democratic class. This agreement is displayed in the room, each student has a copy, and it is used as a reference for class issues as they arise.

▶ **Bone diagram:** This is a chart for monitoring the class agreements. Draw two circles linked by two parallel lines. In one circle, students note targets for what 'the ideal' will be. Then, in the other circle they describe the current state. Along one straight line, list the actions that will support progress towards achieving the 'ideal'. Along the other line, write the actions that might inhibit progress. Have the class regularly revisit the diagram to discuss and map progress.

Parking lot: This serves as an ongoing class feedback chart to post ideas, comments and concerns anonymously, ensuring that all voices are heard. It is a square with four quadrants labelled:
+ – What's going well?
Δ – What needs improvement?
? – questions
! – ideas or issues.

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Perception checks: Regularly stop the class group and ask 'Has anyone found another way to do this?' or 'What would happen if we added …?' or 'Has anyone identified an issue with this idea?'.

This is useful for getting specific feedback. It can uncover a pressing issue or individual concern, and promote reflection, evaluation and the processing of ideas. This can be a circle or paired activity or the questions can be written.

New angles: This activity is based on the film *Dead Poets' Society* when Robin Williams' character stood on his desk to see a new perspective. Ask students to look at an object from a variety of angles: sitting, standing, lying on their sides. This activity may be extended by asking students to sketch an object from three or four different angles. Another extension of this activity is to set students the problem of photographing an object from three or four different angles, showing these photos to others and asking them to guess what it is.

The central concept of these activities is that where we stand can change what we see, thus encouraging students to see people from differing perspectives and to have a new appreciation of their peers.

Student-initiated challenges: Establish opportunities for students to work strategically together to achieve a common goal (eg online games, team technology tasks or physical games where students think, plan and act together).

Hearing all voices: This is a good strategy for starting learning conversations with a new group of students. Participants sit in a circle and can talk about themselves for two minutes or respond to a specific question. One person speaks uninterrupted for two minutes, with the next person in the circle following. The activity supports students in getting to know others while controlling how much they wish to share about themselves.

Partner learning talks: Give students time to share their learning on a task with a partner. They can share progress, seek feedback, ask for help, provide encouragement, ask challenging questions or give another perspective on the topic. Follow-up time is then given for students to refocus on what their next step will be.

Language that teachers can use to develop democratic relationships

- What do you think? We value your opinion.
- What other perspectives might there be?
- What support would you like me to give?
- Could you teach this to someone else?
- How do you feel about your achievement?
- Making mistakes really helps us learn.
- If that didn't work, can you find another way to …?
- Would someone like to volunteer to …?
- When you say those things, how might other people feel?
- We're all in this together.
- In this class, we've agreed to …

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.
Nelson Mandela

This element is not demonstrated if:

- The teacher places all the onus on students to solve their own learning issues or behaviour problems
- Students believe that they have the 'rights' and teachers have the 'responsibilities'
- The teacher is defensive or uses autocratic behaviour when challenged
- Class meetings are held but decisions are not acted upon or items discussed are low level and disconnected from learning
- Voting procedures reflect popularity rather than expertise
- Class discussion is dominated by the teacher or by particular students

Practice check

- Is negotiation real in my classroom? Do students ask for help when they need it?
- Do I create an atmosphere for all students to be equitably engaged?
- Do I talk too much? Might I be the discipline problem?
- How are students supported to make their own decisions?
- Does my teaching style advantage some students over others?
- Is it safe for students to disagree with me or their classmates?

Notes:

How do I ensure that all students experience:
- *dignity and security*
- *the right to participate*
- *respect for their identities*
- *access to information*
- *and privacy?*
Glenda MacNaughton & Gillian Williams

share power for learning