

**EMPOWERING STUDENT THROUGH A
DEMOCRATIC CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY IN A
MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY**

BY

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aimed at using a democratic classroom approach to empower students' thoughts. The study also explored the democratic classroom characteristics that can be established in Malaysian undergraduate classrooms. Case study method was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the real context. For this purpose, EDC 4365 course (Methods in Teaching Moral Education I) was selected to be the context of this study. The selection of participants in this study was done through purposive sampling. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out on six voluntary students who had experienced a democratic classroom approach. Besides the interviews, twenty-two other students who shared similar experience also voluntarily offered their reflective journals that contain their feelings and perceptions towards the democratic classroom approach, particularly in terms of empowering their own thoughts. The data of the interviews were then transcribed and analysed and later, the emerging themes were categorised. As for the journals, the essays were coded accordingly. The findings of this study revealed five major themes. The first theme contains five characteristics of democratic classroom, which are respectful towards each other, meaningful learning, equality, freedom, and power sharing. The second theme is empowerment of thoughts, which emphasises on stimulating, improving critical thinking skills and enhanced creative thinking skills. The third theme is democratic environment which consists of classroom seating arrangement, student centred and democratic surrounding. The fourth theme is self-improvement where students feel enhanced confidence level, enhanced communication skills and improving manner. The final theme is challenges in implementing democratic classroom in terms of lecturers' skills and their ability to handle dominant students. The findings of this study are also in line with Freire's ideology on liberating education, which considers dialogue as the fundamental element in the classroom, as well as Dewey's ideology on democratic education which encourages active learning. Therefore, this study possesses a crucial implication on the policy-makers who have the authority to change the teaching methods, particularly at the higher level of education. It enriches lecturers' role at universities in adjusting their teaching methodologies to enhance students' empowerment.

خلاصة البحث

تنتمي هذه الدراسة إلى مجال الدراسات النوعية، وتهدف إلى تعزيز أفكار الطلاب من خلال استخدام نهج القاعة الدراسية الديمقراطية. كما تسعى الدراسة أيضاً إلى استكشاف خصائص القاعات الدراسية الديمقراطية التي يمكن إنشاؤها في المرحلة الجامعية الأولى (البكالوريوس) في ماليزيا. تم تبني أحد فروع الدراسات النوعية وهو دراسة الحالة، وذلك من أجل اكتساب فهم متعمق للسياق الحقيقي لموضوع الدراسة. ولهذا الغرض تم اختيار مساق (طرق تدريس التربية الأخلاقية 1 - EDC4365)، ليمثل السياق التطبيقي لهذه الدراسة. اعتمدت الباحثة على طريقة العينة القصدية في اختيار مشاركي البحث. تم إجراء مقابلات متعمقة شبه منظمة مع ستة طلاب متطوعين قد مروا بتجربة الدراسة حسب نهج القاعة الدراسية الديمقراطية. وإلى جانب تلك المقابلات قدم اثنان وعشرون طالباً متطوعاً آخرون ممن لديهم تجربة مماثلة لتجربة الدراسة حسب نهج القاعات الدراسية الديمقراطية، قدموا نماذج لمقالاتهم الصحفية التي تعكس مشاعرهم وتصوراتهم تجاه نهج القاعات الدراسية الديمقراطية، والتي كان على رأسها تعزيز عملية تعبيرهم عن أفكارهم الخاصة. قامت الباحثة بنسخ بيانات المقابلات وتحليلها، وتصنيف المحاور والخصائص الناشئة. أما بالنسبة للمقالات الصحفية، فقد قامت الباحثة بإجراء عملية ترميز لها. لقد كشفت نتائج هذه الدراسة عن خمسة محاور رئيسية. يحتوي المحور الأول على خمس خصائص للقاعات الدراسية الديمقراطية، والتي تتمثل في احترام الطلاب لبعضهم البعض والتعلم الهادف والمساواة والحرية وتقاسم السلطة. ويحتوي المحور الثاني على تمكين الأفكار حيث يركّز على تحفيز مهارات التفكير لدى الطلاب وتعزيز مهاراتهم في التفكير الناقد والتفكير الإبداعي. ويتضمن المحور الثالث البيئة الديمقراطية التي تتكون من ترتيب المقاعد داخل الفصل والتعلم المتمركز حول الطلاب وكذلك المحيط الديمقراطي. يتمثل المحور الرابع في التحسين الذاتي، حيث يشعر الطلاب أن مستوى الثقة لديهم يكون مرتفعاً ومهاراتهم الاتصالية تكون معززة وأن أخلاقهم تكون متحسنة. أما المحور الأخير فيشتمل على التحديات التي يواجهها المحاضرون في تنفيذ القاعات الدراسية الديمقراطية من حيث مهاراتهم وقدراتهم على التعامل مع الطلاب السائدين. تتماشى نتائج هذه الدراسة مع أيديولوجية فريير (Freire) حول تحرير التعليم، والتي تعتبر الحوار عنصراً أساسياً في قاعة الدرس، بالإضافة إلى أيديولوجية ديوي (Dewey) حول التعليم الديمقراطي الذي يشجع التعلم النشط. لذلك، فإن هذه الدراسة لها فائدة حيوية لصانعي السياسات الذين لديهم سلطة لتغيير الأساليب التعليمية في ماليزيا، ولا سيما على مستوى التعليم العالي. كما أنها تُثري دور المحاضرين في الجامعات من أجل تعديل أساليب التدريس لديهم نحو مزيد من تعزيز دور الطلاب.

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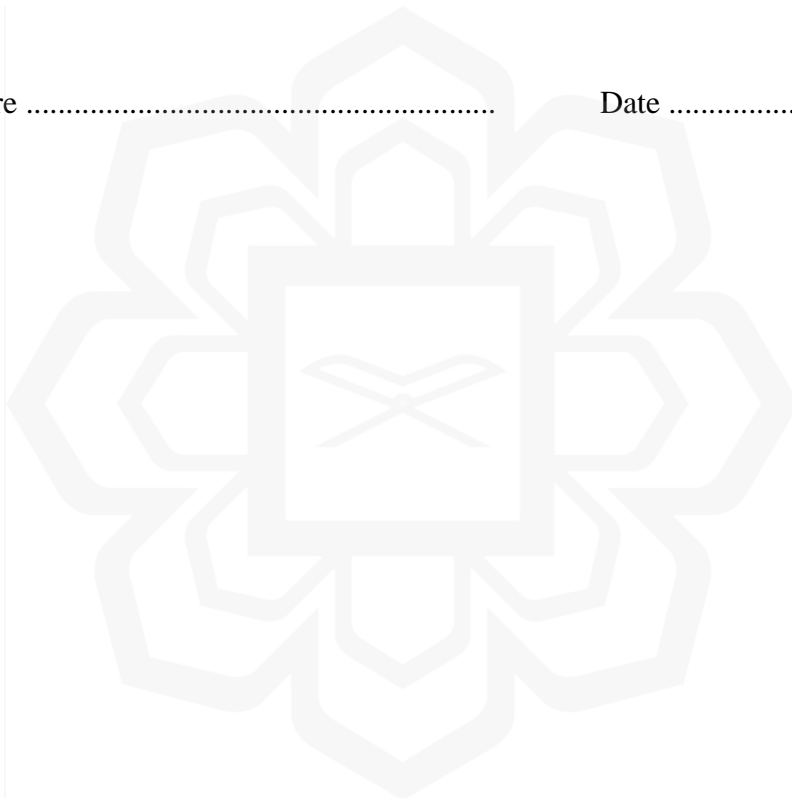
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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This work is Specially dedicated to: My dearest and supportive husband, Mohd Nur Asyrani, My beloved parents, Hasnah and Hamzah, My strength, Muhammad Ubaydah, My dearest siblings; Nur Adilah and Mohd Aizat, Husna and Muhammad Illiyyin, Nur Hannani and Mohamad Zazlan, Nur Afifah and Radzi, Abdul Salam Al-Hafiz, Abdul Halim Al-Amin, Abdul Hakim Al- Azim, Abdul Muhaimin Al-Mursyid, My cute nieces; Nur Iffah Darwisyah, Wafa Sakinah, Nur Hannan Darwisyah, Muhammad Wafi, Muhammad Adam Darwish, Wardah Huwaina, Nur Aqilah Darwisyah, Nur Aleesya Humaira.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 GENERAL OVERVIEW

This chapter presents the readers with the background information to the research. After providing a background of the study, the researcher discusses the statement of the problem that instigated the researcher to conduct this study. Following this, the research questions are described as well as the research objectives. Then, the significance of the course is drawn. Finally, the definition of terms and delimitation of the study are presented.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Over the previous few decades, most higher education institutions in the world have been presented with a pedagogical shift from a conventional approach of teaching to a student-centred approach (Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003; Lee, 2002). The traditional teaching approach emphasises more on conveying the information to the students (Harden & Crosby, 2000; Zohar, 2004). Unlike the student-centred approach, it encourages students to become the leading party during the teaching and learning session (Estes, 2004; Hesson & Shad, 2007). In this approach, students are given the autonomy to be the people who participate actively in the teaching and learning by articulating the information that they received from their teacher (Harden & Crosby, 2000; Huba & Freed, 2000; Weimer, 2002). Furthermore, a student not only plays a role as a ‘knowledge receiver’ in the classroom setting but also the ‘knowledge giver’. Because of that, students can discover more on their own and can also achieve their learning outcomes.

The Malaysian higher education sector is growing rapidly with the government's vision to make Malaysia an educational hub by 2020 (Grapragasem, Krishnan, & Mansor, 2014). To achieve the goal, 21 Malaysian public universities aspire to be the best in research and innovation and try to produce quality graduates who can confidently face the challenges of globalisation. Because of Malaysia's contemporary context and culture, two aspects become the primary consideration: power and authority. Both elements are related to the student-teacher relationship, where the teachers are assumed to gain respect from the students because they are the knowledge-giver. This kind of relationship makes a wide gap in terms of an interaction between teacher and students (Abdullah, 2016). However, as a democratic society, Malaysia needs vigorous, participative citizens and a strong sense of justice (Perliger, Canetti- Nisim, & Pedahzur, 2006). That is why educational institutions should empower students through the appropriate approach in teaching and learning so that the graduates can achieve their goals of empowering themselves for the future.

Though Malaysia aspires to become one of the excellent education hubs in the world, its education system is pulling it back to the traditional way of teaching even at the tertiary level of education, where teachers are still focusing on finishing the syllabus more than focusing on the development of the students to be well-rounded individuals (Sarina, 2014). Such a traditional way of teaching does not allow Malaysian graduates to become empowered as it gives more importance to the teachers as the authorities who deliver lessons. This way of education does not enable students in terms of their thinking because they receive and memorise the materials in the classroom and reproduce them on the examination paper without contemplating on their own. Students aim to get good grades only to have greater employability in the future in this whole process.

To survive in the modern world, Malaysian graduates need to empower themselves physically, intellectually and emotionally. Thus, a traditional teaching approach does not seem sufficient to serve the purpose of empowering future graduates. Recognizing this mismatch between teaching methods and global trends in education now places a high value on instilling soft skills in Malaysian higher education. (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006). The Ministry took the initiative to empower Malaysian graduates by reforming the educational system from traditional to student-centred, where learners are given chances to become more active and responsive. When students are engaged in the classroom, they can have dialogues with the teacher or peers and ask questions that trigger their thought and consciousness. The student-centred approach is also seen as one of the ways to motivate students' way of thinking to be more conscious and critical towards their learning.

The National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHEAP, 2007, 2010) aims at making students aware of the lessons delivered in the classrooms. The core objective of education in Malaysia is to have well-rounded individuals who can contribute to the country. The Malaysian education system develops the holistic individual that encompasses the students' physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual development. Higher education institution is no exception in the realisation of the producing individual as stated by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education in 2007, "This transformation plan aims squarely on holistic human capital development, to produce Malaysians who are intellectually active, creative and innovative, ethically and morally upright, adaptable and capable of critical thinking." (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2007, p. 8).

To make this aspiration into reality, teachers must use the appropriate way of teaching to university students, i.e. the teaching approach that can produce a holistic Malaysian graduate. Among all the teaching strategies of achieving this goal, creating democratic classrooms is a teaching approach that can empower Malaysian graduates and help them face everyday life challenges. According to Ahmad, Said, Mansor, Mokhtar, and Hassan (2014), “the meaning of democratic classroom changes with the changes in its purpose and way of practising in a specific context in this technological age”. This indicates that the democratic classroom is relevant in this 21st century, but it must be done in a suitable way to be valuable and beneficial for the learners of the new generation.

The democratic classroom approach is widely used in western countries and some parts of the Middle East (Ahmad, Said, & Jusoh, 2015; Ahmad, Said, Mansor, Mokhtar, & Hassan, 2014; Davis, 2010; Edwards, 2010; Ferguson-Patrick, 2012; Gentile, 2014; Hur, Glassman, & Kim, 2013; Kocoska, 2009; Laroche, 2015; Morrison, 2008; Subba, 2014). In western countries, a democratic classroom allows students to share their views and experiences with everyone in the classroom where the teacher makes the classroom so welcoming that the students are not subdued under the burden of hesitation. In this way, democratic classes help students be empowered by knowing new insights from the classroom community and raising their critical consciousness as citizens. It is noteworthy that the teacher plays the role of a member of the classroom community.

In a democratic classroom, students not only can express their thoughts and learn how to value others’ opinions that may differ from their perspectives but also learn how to live in harmony through cooperation with others. They can work as a team to achieve the objectives of the class. For instance, when a teacher hands over a task to the students

and does the assignment in a group, they will have an objective to achieve. This is where they can communicate, exchange ideas and harmoniously respect each other. By democratically performing the task, their thinking processes are affected positively (Edwards, 2010). In other words, a democratic classroom pays excellent attention to producing students who have the autonomy in a community that values and encourages a critical approach to the intellectual search for truth and meaning in everyone's life (Purpel, 1989).

On the other hand, most universities have course outlines as guidelines for teachers to deliver lessons in Malaysian higher educational institutions. The course outlines also work as one of the tools to get accreditation from the Malaysian Quality Assurance. However, these course outlines may limit students' freedom to choose what they want to learn, which may empower them, particularly their thoughts. However, it depends on the individual teacher on how they deliver the lesson to the students. It is undoubtedly essential to engage students in the teaching and learning processes (Hackathorn, Solomon, & Blankmeyer, 2011; Hanrahan, 1998; Hernandez, n.d.; Jones & Consultant, 2008; Taylor & Parsons, 2011), but how to do it is another issue. One of the benefits of doing a democratic classroom is that when students engage actively in the lesson, they are not only sitting at the knowledge receiving end but also knowing how to express their understanding about different real-life concerns.

Moreover, students also have to practice questioning the knowledge they receive from their teacher or peers while in the classroom, which requires critical thinking skills. In addition, the democratic classroom approach not only allows power-sharing in the teaching and learning process but also provides scopes for teacher-to-student and student-to-student critical dialogues to take place. Through this power-sharing, students engage in the teaching and learning session, but they can also share the knowledge from

their own experiences and perspectives that may empower their thought by getting new ideas or insights about the things and being aware of the topic lesson. On this note, Guldbrandsen (1998) states that acknowledging students' ideas would make students feel empowered, positively affecting their thoughts and helping them fulfil their learning goals.

The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (2006) promotes a student-centred teaching and learning environment to interact with people and develop soft skills. Lee (1999) claimed that giving students a chance to practice this approach would stimulate critical thinking. Furthermore, a democratic classroom fills in the added value for students to be employed in the future (Idrus, Mohd Dahan, & Abdullah, 2009; Song & Yuen, 2008).

Since classrooms in Malaysia have students from different backgrounds, it is appropriate to allow students to have discussions and exchange thoughts and ideas in the classroom, which is one of the criteria of democratic classrooms. By democratically performing the task, they learn to positively negotiate with others' ideas (Edwards, 2010).

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

A research conducted by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (2017) revealed that university graduates lack communication, interpersonal, problem-solving, teamwork, as well as critical and creative thinking skills. Similar studies conducted by a number of researchers demonstrated that many Malaysian graduates lack critical thinking skills (Yelasmanchili, 2018; Husaina Banu, Nor Aziah, & Abdul Rahman, 2019; Ilhaamie, Rosmawani, & Yusmini, 2018; Mohd Sobri & Mohamad Khairi, 2020).

Additionally, Md Zabir (2010) stated that the essential plan of higher educational institutions in Malaysia is to improve the critical thinking skills of their graduates.

The Malaysian government is concerned about the teaching process in the classrooms (Saleh & Aziz, 2012), acknowledging the importance of the teaching and learning processes in empowering students. In a traditional teaching and learning session, the teacher roles typically as knowledge transmitters to the students. This makes the students focus on passing the examination rather than empowering themselves to be the future agents of change in society. Thus, when students focus on grades to score in the test, they memorise what is in the notes and what is in the textbooks. It proves that when students focus on textbook memorisation, they tend not to be critical and creative in their thoughts. Students end up regurgitating the information in the examination that their teachers and the textbooks delivered to them.

In these circumstances, Malaysian teachers are forced to finish the syllabus and ensure that the graduates obtain good grades and secure employability (Sarina, 2014). Moreover, the teachers are afraid of losing their 'power' towards students. 'Power' here indicates that autonomy as the knowledge giver. (p.27). That is why university students are also lagging in critical thinking as they only receive the lesson they get in the classroom and focus on maintaining good grades for achieving greater employability. However, critical thinking and problem solving are crucial skills in almost all professions (Siti Rahayah, Rosadah, Zolkefli, Rodiah, Shahrir, Basri, & Nor Azaheen, 2008). The tremendous development of technology needs well-rounded people equipped with critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills and high integrity. Thus, these skills are fundamental in the professional sector. Mohd Yusof and Ramlee (2009) claimed that employees with all these skills would be employers 'priority candidates. This statement is also in line with the argument by the Dean of the Centre of Language

and Social Development Technical University of Malaysia (UTEM) (2011). He said, among the elements or criteria highlighted by employers, graduate students do not have the skills in critical thinking and problem solving that causes them to be unable to give opinions and good ideas. This statement shows that the graduates who are empowered in their thought and those who have a well-rounded personality will be the people most likely to be hired by employers.

Apart from that, the former Minister of Higher Education said that university students' weaknesses are lack of communication skills, inability to adapt to the workplace, and lacking critical thinking skills (Metro Harian, 18 April 2012). Therefore, university students need to change their mindset that excellence in academics and credentials is not the essence of a remarkable achievement, but empowering themselves with relevant skills and becoming a holistic person is the real achievement. This kind of stigma needs to be changed to ensure the Malaysian graduate have a fresh idea and can contribute generously to the country, especially to generate the country's income in the future.

The Ministry of Human Resources had surveyed in 2005 and the Ministry of Higher Education in 2006, which showed that the main factor of unemployability is lack of communication skills, particularly oral skills. The other main factor is the lack of critical thinking skills, particularly in logic and problem-solving. This finding is supported by a study in Australia that focused on the students' generic skills in the universities in Australia (National Centre for Vocational Education Research NCVER, 2003). This study focused on enhancing generic skills, especially communication skills, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving skills, the same focus as the Malaysian higher educational institutions. Those skills are the skills that can be transferable across the curriculum.

Akbariah (2009) claimed that studies from other countries had proven that the lack of thinking skills has become more severe among the students in primary schools until tertiary education. It shows that there is a need to enhance students' critical thinking skills. At the international level, most higher education institutions have made it compulsory to have some formal teaching for thinking skills for the students. For instance, California State University and its 19 campuses are implementing teaching courses for their students. Similarly, in Malaysia, things are also going in the same direction. However, the changes are still at the initial stage were in the tertiary level of education, all teachers are required to infuse and integrate the generic skills such as critical and creative thinking skills and good communication in their teaching and learning. Several Malaysian universities have already started special courses that focus on thinking skills, such as in University Utara Malaysia, University Kebangsaan Malaysia, University Teknologi Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Open University Malaysia. Thus, research must be done to investigate what approach can enhance and empower students' thoughts.

The problem arises when the notion of spoon-feeding happen and makes students unable to empower themselves (Thang & Alias, 2007; Thang, 2009; Saleh & Aziz, 2012; Naziha, Ahmad, & Nordin, 2013; Naginder, 2014; Sarina, 2014; Mahamod, Ismail, & Wan Mohammad, 2015). When spoon-feeding culture takes over the entire education system, knowledge sharing becomes limited to one "authorised party" or teacher and the "recipients" or students. Such one-way communication in teaching and learning is no longer seen as relevant in the education system. Nithy (2010) argued that "students and teachers should be agents of change, but because teachers are so authoritative in classrooms, most learners will not dare speak up and will not argue for perspectives opposed to their teachers' views" (p. E18). Therefore, Malaysian

graduates should liberate themselves from being a product from the factory and instead be well-rounded people who are self-empowered.

Teachers should focus on student empowerment by encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning (Sarina, 2014). When students can take responsibility for their learning, they become empowered and practice the knowledge they learn together in the classroom to make a social action. Students who take their responsibility towards their learning are the students who know what they want to learn and how they will use what they learnt for their life.

In addition, educators are advised to acquire specific teaching methods in critical thinking to empower our Malaysian graduates with similar skills. Educators should implement the elements of a democratic classroom approach by implementing case studies and real problem contexts, allowing students to express their own opinions and encouraging them to independently learn how to analyze and solve real problems. This makes more sense for them because it helps them develop their learning experience (Afifah & Nurbarirah, 2017). Thus, the teacher can start to think and create a democratic classroom that can empower learning. In the democratic classroom, students are allowed to be active, preparing them to be active social agents. When they become active students, they know and are conscious of what they want to learn, leading them to construct their learning.

The democratic classroom is one of the new learning paradigms that can accommodate students to mutually improve learning structures that eventually transmute the knowledge for their learning. Therefore, the researcher must explore how a democratic classroom can be an excellent alternative to encourage students to empower their thinking.