

Practicing Democracy in the Classroom

A Course in Participation

by Simon Jenkins

The break-up of the Soviet Union created an ideological vacuum in many of the newly independent republics of Central Asia. While democratic reforms introduced in the past 10 years have begun to fill the political void, many citizens of these republics still know little about democracy or, worse, are uninterested in it after witnessing the corrupt practices that have accompanied timid democratization.



Traditionally, Central Asian societies have had highly authoritarian and non-participatory styles of government. Soviet rule continued this tradition, including a ban on almost all forms of civil society or private criticism of authority. This governing style was, and to a great extent still is, reflected in an education system in which most teachers limited student interaction or oral participation and possessed final authority on every question. Furthermore, rampant corruption in the schools, where students often pay for grades, means that students have limited experience with the democratic principle of equal opportunity.

IFES realized that if democracy was going to be anything more than a buzzword associated with other countries, we had to change the culture of the classroom, which meant changing the pedagogical methods used there.

STUDENT QUOTES FROM VILLAGE SCHOOLS

“You have turned our classroom into an island of democracy.”

“...the IFES class is the thinking class.”

“I never knew girls had ideas, too.”

“We never have discussions in any of our other subjects.”

In Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, IFES (with the support of the Ministries of Education, USAID and other funders) piloted a civic education textbook with an extensive teacher guide, designed for the final years of secondary school. During textbook development, IFES' initial emphasis was on content. We aimed to describe the democratic principles and standards – unfamiliar to many citizens – that the respective governments

had committed to uphold. However, we soon realized that the way we presented the material was equally, if not more, important than the content.

To address this issue, the IFES team first prepared interactive lessons where students worked in groups to complete tasks related to governance and civics. Teachers and students wrote some of the lessons, often focusing on family and community issues that students face daily. However, we found that many teachers and, to a lesser extent, students were ill-prepared for this interactive approach. Initially, we thought the problem was merely their unfamiliarity with this new method. In fact, this was only half the problem; the other half was a legacy

from the less-than-democratic nature of their societies.

Adjusting our approach, we began to discuss the importance of student interaction with teachers and to train them how to plan and manage a class in which they have choices about what to teach. Under the former system, teachers filled students' heads with facts through rote learning and did not encourage students to examine why things were the way they were. Given this experience, teachers assumed that students only learned when they lectured or passed on authoritative knowledge. When they realized that students could learn from each other, they felt redundant and might naturally have wanted to disengage, a chaotic formula for classroom instruction. Instead, IFES showed them how to actively promote conversation, as class facilitators, rather than dominate it.

Has this work been successful? Of course, teachers always appreciate new learning materials, but we realized we were hitting the target when we started getting very favorable reports from village schools.

Classroom monitoring reveals that IFES' training of teachers in classroom management has decreased their lecturing and has greatly increased student participation. More importantly, students see the advantages of protecting everyone's right to speak and feel they are not just learning about democracy and governance—they are practicing it, too.

IFES and its partners have begun taking this approach to civic education to additional schools in Central Asia, and the impact of these teaching methodologies, and the democratic principles underlying them, is being felt throughout society as students and parents read and discuss the school textbook together. Practicing democracy in the classroom is thus helping to build a culture of democracy that extends beyond the classroom walls.

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