Sexuality Education Can Strengthen Democracy

Sexuality educators challenge students to think for themselves—an essential element of democracy.

ROBERT SELVERSTONE

I agree with H. G. Wells that “human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.” And in that race, those fortunate enough to have experienced a good program of comprehensive sexuality education have a decided advantage.

National opinion polls report that 89 percent of adults support sexuality education, an extraordinarily high number, especially when compared with the pluralities by which we elect U.S. Presidents. Clearly, most adults recognize the importance of sexuality education both in helping to develop healthy young people and in the way it can help sustain healthy sexual attitudes and behavior throughout one’s lifetime.

But the merits of sexuality education go beyond these narrow criteria, because sexuality education provides an excellent paradigm for education for participation in a pluralistic democracy. Good sexuality education affirms the importance and the dignity of individual choice inherent in Paulo Freire’s (1972) assertion that education is never neutral: it is either for freedom or for domination.

Sexuality and Democracy

Comprehensive sexuality education and education for a democracy have many important common features. They both seek to help individuals:

• maintain physical and mental health,
• form and maintain stable relationships,
• develop decision-making skills,
• develop a tolerance for diversity.

On the cognitive level, sexuality education provides developmentally appropriate information necessary to maintain one’s physical health and to make rational decisions about sexual health (What is the effectiveness or failure rate of various contraceptives?). But the phrase “comprehensive” sexuality education means that it extends beyond the cognitive domain to include issues of affec (feelings, values, and attitudes), pay important attention to improving the communication skills of listening and clear assertive expression, and help students learn to make responsible decisions about their sexual behavior. (Under what conditions is a particular form of sexual expression acceptable? To your parents? In your religious or ethical tradition? To your female/male peers? As presented in the media? To yourself?) Citizens who can make decisions in their own self-interest with awareness and concern for the welfare of others are an essential element in a democracy.

Another important element in sexuality education classes that helps students learn important lessons about democracy is the instructional process commonly used in these classrooms: a student-centered, discussion-oriented approach that demands nonjudgmental respect for all students and their various points of view at the same time that it gently provokes and challenges students to examine and to clarify their thoughts, feelings, values, and behavior.

Since I have been teaching a course in “Human Sexuality” for 11th and
12th graders for the past 12 years, I can provide an example of how this operates in my classroom. I find that for productive and emotionally safe classroom discussion to occur, we must establish certain “ground rules.” At the beginning of each course, I make sure that students know that the class will respect their right to privacy (the right to “pass”), that we will not allow put-downs (no “killer” statements), that individuals will speak for themselves (“I” statements), and that we will respect speakers and not gossip about them outside of the class (“confidentiality”). These ground rules reflect essential democratic and humanistic principles of respect for self and for others.

From Lyrics to Lives

Once we get into discussion, I find that it is helpful to demonstrate to students that the process of relationship building/courtship/seduction is not an especially new social development. I pass out copies of the 300-plus-year-old Andrew Marvel poem “To His Coy Mistress” and read it with the class. We follow this by playing the Rod Stewart song, “Tonight’s the Night” (Warner 1976):

Kick off your shoes and sit right down,
Loosen up that pretty French gown,
Let me pour you a good long drink.
Ooh baby, don’t you hesitate.
Tonight’s the night.
‘Cause I love ya babe
Ain’t nobody gonna stop us now.
Come on angel, my heart’s on fire.
Don’t deny your man’s desire.
You’d be a fool to stop this time.
The secret is about to unfold.
Don’t say a word, my virgin child.
Upstairs before the night’s too old.

I find this particular song an especially fertile vehicle (no pun intended) for examining many different issues (from the “pretty French gown,” the “good long drink,” and “I love ya babe,” to “Don’t deny your man’s desire...” “You’d be a fool to stop this time...” her virginity and inhibitions, etc.). After listening to the song and following the lyrics on a page, students form into groups of four or five to consider their reactions to the song’s message(s) and its inherent values. After 5 to 10 minutes of small-group discussion, the class reconvenes and I ask students to continue considering the song’s messages. My experience is that following the small leaderless group discussions with a teacher-led full-class discussion combines the advantages of both processes. While in small groups, all students are able to express themselves and to assume responsibility for conducting the discussions themselves; in the large group, the teacher can guide the discussion to be sure that a greater variety of viewpoints can be expressed.

Despite great progress in the acceptance of sexuality education throughout the 1980s, small but determined opposition in many communities continues to limit implementation of comprehensive sexuality education programs. In Winning the Battle, Debra W. Haffner and Diane de Mauro of the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) provide step-by-step guidelines on how to develop and maintain community support and how to respond to organized opposition.

The price of Winning the Battle varies from $18 per copy for 1 to 4 copies to $12 per copy for 100 or more copies. To order, contact:

Dept. PC
SIECUS
130 West 42nd St., Suite 2500
New York, NY 10036
212-935-2832

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unstable relationships, one's responsibility for one's own behavior and that of one's friends, sex-role stereotypes, peer pressure, truth and untruth in communication, decision-making skills, and diversity. (Is it okay for some males and females to behave in a manner that is counter to the prevailing adolescent or adult values or culture?)

The Business of Educators

But might not such "liberal" education (in contrast to more traditional educational indoctrination with absolute rules of good and bad, right and wrong) raise some ire with segments of the community that oppose change? Absolutely! As Postman and Weingartner advised us two decades ago, teaching is indeed a "subversive activity"—at least when properly conducted. But it is subversive only in respect to the imposition of authoritarian control; indeed it is faithful to the highest aspirations of education in and for a democracy. To appreciate the reason for such subversion, we need recall only what beverage was served to that great teacher, Socrates, for challenging people to think for themselves.

The history of civilization is the history of challenges, change, and improvements; and in a democracy it is the business of education to initiate challenges and urge consideration of change. Until challenged—and changed—U.S. law supported slavery and racial and religious discrimination, forbade women to vote, and often kept married women from teaching. Until just recently, our laws even outlawed the sale and use of contraception and condoned spousal assault and rape.

Comprehensive sexuality education helps prepare students for living in a democracy by encouraging them to search for ways in which they as individuals and as a community can continue to evolve toward greater understanding, equality, and freedom. We must heed H.G. Wells' warning about education's race against catastrophe and learn to conduct our sexuality education so that it encourages freedom of thought—not domination.

References


Robert Selverstone is a psychologist in private practice. He also teaches a human sexuality course at Staples High School in Westport, Connecticut. His mailing address is 26 Imperial Aire, Westport, CT 06880.

SIECUS

Sex Information and Education Council of the United States—SIECUS—is an organization that affirms sexuality as a natural and healthy part of living and advocates the right of individuals to make responsible sexual choices. SIECUS is a clearinghouse; it develops, collects, and disseminates information and promotes comprehensive sexuality education. If we can be of assistance to your school program, please contact us at:

SIECUS
140 West 42nd St., Suite 2500
New York, NY 10036.