



CHAPTER 12

Eugene Matusov, “Teachers as Benevolent Dictators”

Eugene Matusov

This book ends with an example of twenty-first century adaptations of Duberman’s egalitarian education. Some professors remain committed to student-centered learning in democratic classrooms. They want students to take ownership, exert initiative, and explore personally meaningful material. Those instructors regret the current penchant for defining academic outcomes all students should reach, creating accreditation standards shaping what students should know and do, and seeking diplomas for vocational rewards rather than self-discovery. Fortunately, good teaching (of all kinds)

This chapter is a shorter version of Eugene Matusov, “Promoting an educational culture of democratic dialogic education in a conventional university: Teacher as a benevolent dictator” in *Dialogic Pedagogy: An International Online Journal* (2021). In a much longer and more abstract article, Eugene compares his instructional practices with Duberman’s seminar: “Democracy, Dialogue, Therapy, Progressivism, Anarchism, and other values in Martin Duberman’s Innovative Pedagogy” in *Dialogic Pedagogy: An International Online Journal* (2021).

is a higher priority on campus than it was in the mid-twentieth century. Centers for Teaching Effectiveness, awards and prizes, student course evaluations, and workshops for graduate students mark an unprecedented commitment to instructional competence.

One of my University of Delaware colleagues, Eugene Matusov, said that he and Martin are “different branches on the same tree” of non-authoritarian education. They both emphasize student empowerment. Eugene pays less attention than Martin to the fusion of emotions and ideas; group therapy was never part of his life. He gives more attention to explicit ways for students to make decisions. Recently he made this significant change: he structures the first five weeks so students experience democratic education before deciding whether or not to embrace it. To do that requires his temporary “benevolent dictatorship.” Furthermore, Eugene is more optimistic than Martin that his course can counteract the lamentable docility fostered by pre-college schooling and the conventional college courses that still abound.

The issue is not whether Eugene’s approach is better than Martin’s. That would be another study, beginning with a definition of better. The point here is to show the range of possibilities within democratic education. There is no single path to follow or script to use. Democratic education is a spirit or impulse, with the details left open for teachers and students to develop. Open enough that what might seem traditional—Eugene’s temporary dictatorship—can be used for the sake of nontraditional outcomes.

Furthermore, the tone of this chapter suggests that twenty-first century democratic educators avoid the bitter quarrels splintering many other reformers in the past. Duberman saw that discord in his early research on the abolitionists and later in his gay rights advocacy. “How to account for the endemic cut-and-slash style of movement work, the penchant for converting each other into the Enemy, is an ongoing puzzle.”¹ The same wonderment applies to the history of school reform. Advocates of a particular approach often scolded colleagues within the profession rather than fight outsiders. We’ve seen internecine battles over phonics and whole language, back-to-basics versus teaching for understanding, mathematics with or without calculators, and so on. What gets overlooked is the common ground both sides share and the common enemies they face, especially the peer pressure, electronic media, and American anti-intellectualism that discourage reading, writing, and even talking.

To introduce the notion of a teacher as a benevolent dictator, let me start with the following event that occurred in Fall, 2018, in one of

my undergraduate classes. I tried to run all my classes democratically by engaging my students in decision making about their own education. One of these opportunities for decision making let the class choose what to study: at the end of each session, the students chose from a list of curricular topics (“The Curricular Map”). A student would propose a topic and try to convince her peers to choose it; then the students voted on all proposals to select the topic for the next class meeting.

A second opportunity for decision making concerned the “pedagogical regime” (Matusov and Marjanovic-Shane 2017) the students preferred for themselves. The students had a choice of four pedagogical regimes that I provided:

1. Open Syllabus for self-responsible autodidacts, where students could make all decisions about their own education.
2. Opening Syllabus for “other-responsible learners,” where I made the initial decisions about the organization of the class and then gradually transferred responsibility to the students.
3. Non-traditional Closed Syllabus for credential students, who just want to be certified via passing exams, similar to receiving a driver’s license.
4. Non-Syllabus for “prisoners of education”—i.e., students who were forced to take this class by the university, but who felt that the class was unnecessary and painful. They are free to do no studying whatsoever.

Third, I tried to turn any emerging problem or organizational question in the class into an opportunity for collective deliberation and democratic decision making (e.g., should we have a break in our 3-h class meetings?). Finally, another area of decision making was how to make collective decisions—by majority vote, reaching consensus, flipping a coin, making individual decisions, delegating decision making to me, or splitting into groups with common curricular interests?

I used to believe that students’ decision making would promote ownership of their own education (Matusov 2015). I was not afraid of their “bad” decisions because I expected that they would experience the consequences of these “bad” decisions and would correct them through democratic methods. However, my views have changed.

Just before the 2018 fall semester started, I was asked to teach a course on cultural diversity for future teachers and for students who needed to meet the “multicultural” university requirement. Because of this last-minute change, I could not choose a room for this class. Usually, I request a room with flexible desks that allow for groupwork. The rectangular room assigned had a conventional set of moveable desk-chairs in several rows, facing two long blackboards. Students were sitting at their individual desks with their laptops, which we used in the class. I employed diverse learning activities of group study and discussions, individual studies, whole-class video watching, and whole-class discussions. For the group studies, students moved their desk-chairs together to form small circles, but then they returned to the row formation. During whole-class discussions, a few students tried to listen to and engage in the discussion, some were consumed with whatever was on the screens of their laptops or smartphones, and some were in and out.

The class had multiple pedagogical regimes giving students opportunities to attend or not attend classes. I had a small core of students who came all the time or almost all the time. Another group of students was coming from time-to-time. The third group of students came rarely. A fourth group of students never came to the class after the initial meetings.

At the end of each meeting, the attending students wrote Exit Reflections. They frequently said that the class was interesting but boring. The class was often interesting for the students because of the presented material, dialogic provocations, emergent controversies, and deep discussions. As some of them openly shared in the Exit Reflections and in class, boredom arose when very few students participated in the whole class discussions as many students disengaged themselves partially or fully from the class. In response, I said that it was very normal within any collective discussion for participants to have more interest at one time in the topic and then less. I said that if students disengaged themselves by doing something else on their laptop or a smartphone when they felt bored, it would be very difficult to come back for a more engaging part of the discussion. My students agreed, but this discussion of the problem did not help.

At mid-semester, we had a town hall meeting to discuss how we felt about the class and how to improve it. A student suggested we change the desk-chair arrangement to make a circle. This student argued that the circle arrangement might boost students’ engagement and attention during whole-class discussions. We discussed the pros and cons of this—it seemed that the idea got support from their peers. But at the next class

meeting, this proposal was voted down by one vote. The students who opposed this proposal argued that they liked the privacy and anonymity of the desk row formation—the circle formation would provide too much visibility for them. The problem of disengagement continued along with the students' complaints in their Exit Reflections.

A few weeks after the mid-term town hall meeting, a student I will call Peter, who attended this class regularly, came to my office. Peter demanded that I impose the circle arrangement of the desks. He argued that my insistence on democratic decision making in the class ironically created vicious cycles of student disengagement. Based on their prior experiences with conventional education, students made decisions to protect themselves from educational impositions. However, this protection created the very same disengagement and alienation the students complained about. With my philosophical beliefs in democracy, I asked Peter to bring this idea to the class meeting. But he demurred. Peter said that his peers would once again vote this idea down. He argued that many of his peers could not make an informed decision because they needed to test the ideas before deciding on them—to experience these two different sitting arrangements and their consequences to make a thoughtful decision. It made sense to me. I agreed to unilaterally impose the circular desk formation, but I also decided to promote the class's reflection on that at the end of the class. Another innovation Peter suggested was for me to leave the class during small group discussions, so it would make more sense for the groups to report back to me (and each other) about their discussions when I returned. Before that, I had tried to move from group to group during the small group discussions. I agreed to impose that change as well.

When I did, all students commented on how engaging the class became. They focused on their excitement with the topic of the class, which was preschool in Japan, China, and the United States (Tobin et al. 1989).

At the end of the class meeting, the students were unanimous in continuing this circular sitting arrangement and their small group discussions without me. After this class meeting, I met with Peter, who made the original proposal of my imposition. He thought I should develop a list of necessary impositions to present to students at the beginning of the semester. Students should experience my impositions promoting their learning engagement first and then consider changing them later if they disliked them. Peter insisted that not all educational or organizational

decisions must be done democratically for authentic democratic education to be promoted. At least, not immediately. Peter argued that students must experience and value authentic education, in which the students first have an opportunity to define and explore their interests, develop their own opinions, and critically examine them. The students should have a taste of it to make informed democratic choices and decisions. The teacher must impose authentic education first on the students, who have been raised in and by authoritarianism, and only then engage them in democracy. This authoritarian role of a democratic teacher in building a democratic culture might be called “benevolent dictator.”

Another good example of a situation that requires the teacher’s benevolent dictatorship in my classes was an issue of a class break. For many years, I intentionally did not schedule a class break in my almost 3-h undergraduate and graduate classes. I expected that the issue of class break could become one of the first issues where the students sought democratic decision making. And often I was right. However, if this issue emerged earlier in the semester when a classroom learning community was not yet formed, most of the students voted to shorten the class rather than to have a refreshing break in the middle as they initially suggested. After a class had developed a taste for genuine education based on the students’ interests, the class voted for having a break in the middle of the class and not to shorten it. Also, the time of shortening the class vs. having a break varied. When the class time was shortened, students shortened it for 20 to 30 min. When the students set a break in the middle of the class, it was between 5 and 10 min. When students experience genuine, authentic education, they often do not want to shorten the length of the class meeting because these students apparently feel that their in-class experience is important. This is education for education’s own sake—intrinsic education (Matusov and Marjanovic-Shane 2019). My interpretation is that when the students lack ownership of education in the class, they wanted to protect their time from the impositions of the class. However, when they felt ownership of the class, they did not want to shorten it. The students seemed to become hungry for education and wanted more of it, not less. That is how I decided to include a mid-class break as a part of my teacher’s benevolent dictatorship and not to offer it to my students for their initial democratic decision making.

Finally, a student from one of my undergraduate 2018 fall courses Leslie (a pseudonym), who later volunteered to be an unpaid Teaching

Assistant to continue her experience with democratic education, criticized my multi-syllabus class with the four pedagogical regimes described above. Leslie appreciated the freedom of choice I was giving to the students, but she argued that I was giving it too soon, on the first day of the class. Many students had not experienced democratic dialogic education in their life, knowing only oppressive alienated education. That was why some of them rushed out from my class by choosing the Open Syllabus pedagogical regime, stopped coming to class, stopped learning anything, and got an unconditional A. For example, a fall 2018 student of mine wrote on the RateMyProfessors.com website about the class:

Take for a multicultural requirement or breadth! The 2nd class we went over the course and you have options as to your syllabus. CHOOSE AN OPEN SYLLABUS. I literally wrote a paragraph or two on what I planned on doing in this class and stuck to it for the semester and was able to grade myself with an A! No hw [homework], no exams, no attendance, still an A.

Arguably, they were Prisoners of Education masquerading as autodidacts. Leslie disagreed. Although she acknowledged that some of them might be true Prisoners of Education, they were not informed enough and, thus, they could not make an informed choice. Leslie suspected that some of them might like democratic dialogic education if they had a chance to taste it. Leslie insisted that I must impose the Opening Syllabus pedagogical regime on my future students to give them a flavor of democratic dialogic education. Rereading students' anonymous feedback at the end of the semester, I noticed that some of my past students discussed this issue. Some of them endorsed Leslie's argument but some others insisted on preservation of students' choices from the beginning of the class. After agonizing, I decided to accept a role of a benevolent dictator and run a pedagogical experiment in fall 2020 semester. At the beginning of the class, I gave my students a choice of only three pedagogical regimes; I withheld Open Syllabus. All of my students chose Opening Syllabus during that semester. At week #5, I offered the Open Syllabus option. About half of my students in the class decided to attend the class regularly. Of the students who chose Open Syllabus, only one third seemed to be hidden Prisoners of Education as judged by the quality of their self-assessment and voluntary participation in the class forum.

REFLECTIONS

My original philosophical belief in democracy as a self-correcting political regime apparently required revisions. First of all, within a class community, this self-correction *requires time* in experiencing problems, becoming aware of them, developing alternatives, and testing these alternatives to see if they address the problems satisfactorily. A 15-week university semester is too short for this pedagogical experimentation for many of my students. The students might get stuck with their bad decisions without having an opportunity to test them and then try alternative solutions. Most of the students will never take another democratic class with me (or with anybody else at my university). We meet once a week for two and a half hours. However, democracy as a culture requires time to develop. For example, one teaching problem in my past classes was how I, as a discussion facilitator, should offer the public floor. Should it be only by students volunteering by raising their hands, or should I call on some students who do not volunteer, or should it be “the 5th Amendment”—I would have the right occasionally to call on non-volunteering students, while they would have the right to remain silent by saying, “pass,” without any explanation (Shor 1996). In the past, I discussed this issue with my students at the beginning of the semester, and the students predictably voted for the volunteering solution—I could only call on students who volunteered. And this solution predictably had a problem, about which I had informed my students in advance. Rather quickly in the semester, two groups emerged: a talkative minority and a silent majority. In some classes, the students corrected this during a mid-term town hall meeting by proposing and voting on the 5th Amendment rule. It often made a difference, but it was too late in the semester to experience deep, engaging, and inclusive discussions. Many of my past students recommended the 5th Amendment rule be part of the initial class’ pedagogical regime and not let the students vote on it at the beginning. As one student pointed out, the postponement of this rule robbed them of many learning opportunities because their discussions were truncated by the limited number of students who participated.

Yet, at times, a late awareness of the problem about their own education can be an important benchmark of their growth and important learning. For example, one student in the anonymous online evaluation suggested the following class improvement: “Maybe have some requirements for coming to class. As much as I loved doing outside research

with other members of the class, I think it didn't encourage my attendance and now that the semester is ending, I wish I had spent more time learning in class rather than outside of class." The student started appreciating the learning classroom community of their peers and the professor only at the end of the semester and wished to be forced to attend the class by the teacher, a benevolent dictator, from the beginning of the semester. However, it is highly possible that this student might not develop this value of her own intrinsic education and the classroom community if she were forced to come to the class. In my view, it is important for the students to experience certain problems in order to appreciate intrinsic, authentic, education and a learning community, even at the expense of losing some important educational opportunities. I do not think that intrinsic education can be problem-free or waste-free. Elimination of problems and waste can kill the organic nature of the intrinsic education. On the other hand, too many problems and too much waste can be toxic.

The second way to understand the concept of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for democratic education is within the notion of the *culture of authentic education*. Most of the students have not experienced a democratic pedagogical regime and came from authoritarian, if not totalitarian, pedagogical regimes. Most of my students feel defensive, mainly concerned with protecting themselves from teachers' coercive engagement. Low engagement and high grades is their ideal. However, as a result, this defensive culture leads to even more disengagement and alienation, which, in turn, undermines their democratic decision making. Students' true educational decision making starts with students caring about and valuing their own education. The more they are alienated from their own education, the less they are interested in their decision making about it (or their decisions are guided by their alienating defensive culture). This is the vicious cycle that Peter was talking about.

In contrast to the first issue discussed above, this problem cannot be solved by time—simply by the students experiencing and reflecting on the problem. Vicious cycles of defensive alienation are not self-correcting. Without having a taste of educational excitement in the classroom, it is difficult for the students to develop care for their own education. Now, I think I was wrong to believe that democratic education starts with the students' decision making about their own education. I think it starts with experiencing authentic education that creates excitement in the students. This experience of authentic education gives rise to the students' yearning

for it, which leads to a need for its protection, nurturing, and expansion through their collective and individual democratic decision making.²

This problem of transition from authoritarianism to sovereignty (e.g., democracy) is not new. In the Old Testament, Moses let the Israelites wander in a desert for 40 years before they could reach the promised land to shake off their culture of slavery. Constitutional sanction of unpopular freedoms (e.g., the rights of criminals) have been developed in some democracies to guard against populism guided by authoritarian cultures. Similarly, I wonder if, in the context of otherwise conventional/authoritarian institutional education, a limited authoritarian protectorate to nurture authentic democratic education is also warranted. An authoritarian postponement of the Open Syllabus pedagogical regime or an imposition of the 5th Amendment rule described above are good examples of such limited and, arguably, justified benevolent authoritarianism.

TEACHER AS A BENEVOLENT DICTATOR IN DEMOCRATIC DIALOGIC EDUCATION

I conceptualize “teacher as a benevolent dictator in democratic dialogic education” in the following way. First, a benevolent dictator invites and then, if accepted by the students, throws the students into democratic dialogic education (cf. Heidegger’s and Sartre’s notion of “thrownness,” Heidegger and Stambaugh 1996). In my view, the nature of *invitation* allows some or all students to reject this invitation and remain firmly in the grip of conventional authoritarian education. This feature makes the invitation benevolent. Still, in my view, the invitation is always dictatorial because, in the context of the otherwise conventional authoritarian institution, the teacher has *the institutional power* to unilaterally return to the authoritarian pedagogical regime at any time. It is the teacher who grants students their educational freedoms, which they can also revoke at will. This hovering power of granting and withdrawing the students’ liberties constitutes the teacher’s *domination* (cf. Pettit 2014). Students intuitively know that, and it takes time for them to trust that the teacher won’t do it. For example, a student of mine, who had chosen Open Syllabus and designed her learning activities without summative assessment (she assigned an unconditional A for the class to get away from grading altogether), sent me her investigative essays (self-assignments) at

the end of the semester. I asked her if she sent them to me for my feedback. She explained that she just wanted to show me that she completed the promised work for the class to make sure that she "deserved" an A for the class. I replied that according to her own Open Syllabus design, it was she who made all the decisions about the class grade. She answered that she wanted to make sure that this was still the case. She wrote, "I don't want any surprises." Some students may not fully trust the democratic teacher until the semester is over and the students see that the teacher has stood by his words.³

Second, a benevolent dictator is responsible for the emergence of a truly educational culture in the classroom to give students a taste of educational excitement. Here are some examples of students' articulation of their taste for genuine education in their anonymous online evaluation of the class at the end of the semester:

- "This class really encouraged students to enjoy and explore the material at their own interest. We acted as a community of learners using the class website and class discussions."
- "[The class] allowed the students to choose how they wanted to learn and what they wanted to learn in their own manner without the stress involved in their learning experience. It was a very stress-free yet content-filled class."
- "This course allowed me to go into an interview and project what I have been learning on my own, and that landed me the job!"

As I discussed above, if students do not have a taste of genuine education, they might not care about it, and, as a result, their democratic decision making might be guided by a concern to protect themselves from teachers' educational impositions and colonization of their time, attention, ideas, and energy and from the teachers' and peers' potentially negative judgments and evaluation. As shown above, their defensive decisions to preserve the privacy of their sitting arrangements, to cut class time, or to allow the teacher to call only on students who volunteer to talk and so on often create vicious cycles of students' alienation from their own education. In turn, this alienation increases the students' defensive decision making and help to promote a defensive student culture that causes the alienation in the first place. Thus, I argue that a teacher as a benevolent dictator in a democratic dialogic education classroom has

to unilaterally promote a student culture of authentic education, at least during the first part of the class term. After the participating students have enough chances to get a taste of democratic dialogic education to judge its value for themselves, the teacher's unilateral grip on the organization of the class and its design can be (gradually or abruptly) relaxed, and the responsibility for it can be shared with the students through increasing democratic decision making. Then, students' possible rejection of the democratic dialogic education becomes their informed choice.

Currently, my benevolent dictatorship at the beginning of my undergraduate and graduate classes includes the following unilateral arrangements:

1. An individual choice of four pedagogical regimes
 - a. Open Syllabus for autodidacts—I postponed it for the first five weeks of the class, and I ask my students to submit their initial Open Syllabus design on a special online class forum for my feedback. This choice becomes available for my students only after the five first weeks in the semester
 - b. Opening Syllabus for other-responsible learners with initially non-negotiable learning activities, organization of the class, and choices backed up by grading
 - c. Non-Traditional Closed Syllabus for credential students—a set of graded exams and learning activities
 - d. Non-Syllabus for prisoners of education with an unconditional grade of the student's choice and saying goodbye to the student
Grace period of 5 weeks of the 15-week semester to pick a pedagogical regime from the list above.
2. Default classroom pedagogical regime of Opening Syllabus, which includes:
 - a. Curriculum Map—a list of possible curricular topics to study that can be extended by the students
 - b. Democratic deliberative decision making about what to study for the next class
 - c. A choice of who prepares and (co)teaches the class
 - d. Teaching plans, structure of the lesson, and learning activities, when I teach the class
 - e. The 5th Amendment rule of whom the teacher can call on

- f. Name tags for everyone
- g. Music at the beginning of the class and during group/individual work
- h. Sitting arrangements in the class
- i. No homework (except 1 online posting per week) or exams
- j. Self-studies during the class (often as a part of the flip instruction)
- k. One minimum online posting without any limit (min or max) of wording on issues broadly related to the course between class meetings
- l. 10 min break in the middle in class
- m. Exit Reflection at the end of the class
- n. Mid-term "Town Hall Meeting" culminating with proposals for improvements of the class and democratic decision making
- o. Main Learning Project, graded by the author(s) of the Project and the class peers and/or the teacher—the student's choice. In a case of discrepancy, the author(s) chooses the final score for the Project on the graded continuum. Also, the first draft of the Project must be submitted to the class peers and/or the teacher for feedback
- p. Required attendance: either face-to-face or virtual (with several options)
- q. The final grade for the class is based on points for attendance, online participation, and Main Learning Projects (or on the exams for Credential Students)

Of course, some students might have had prior experience with authentic and democratic dialogic education, and, thus, they might need less or none of this benevolent dictatorship. When I have classes with many former students, they can heighten a sense of the trust in the other students. I expect that with some critical mass of seasoned and/or returning autodidact learners, the benevolent dictatorship becomes unnecessary.

But why would university students accept the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for democratic education? I think that there are four major sources of acceptance.

1. The first is unconditional authoritarian institutional power. Undergraduate and graduate students have been socialized for at least 12 years of their formative life in accepting unconditionally the authoritarian institutional power. Things must be unconditionally accepted by the students just because the institution or its teachers said so through its rules, syllabi, and regulations.
2. The second is the students' conditional trust in the teacher's epistemological and pedagogical expertise. This trust is conditional: if the teacher proves to be relevant, helpful, and exciting for the students, the trust credit will grow. However, if students (some or all) find the teacher irrelevant, unhelpful, and boring the trust diminishes.
3. The third source of student acceptance of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship is the teacher explicating their dictatorship and providing reasons for their unilateral decision making. The teacher's reasoning dialogizes the benevolent dictatorship by addressing the students, by promoting them to ask questions, by encouraging their counter-reasoning, and, thus, by creating conditions for legitimate and public challenging the teacher's dictatorship by the students.
4. Finally, the fourth source is the teacher's care of the students from day one of the class by asking for their feedback at the end of each class and addressing students' concerns and complaints. In my classes, in addition to Exit Reflections, I created an online forum for Anonymous Feedback. Also, students express their concerns about the class via an online class forum open to all students in the class or raise issues directly in class. The students get the message that their teacher cares about their concerns and is eager to make the class better for them.

In my view, it is important to move the source of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship away from the unconditional authoritarian institutional authority toward the students' conditional trust, the teacher's reasoning, and the teacher's care. When the class is progressing well, there are signs of this move. For example, at times, students ask me to choose the next topic for the class. However, when I do this, they demand from me an explanation of why I chose this particular topic—why this topic will be good for them in general and for the next class specifically. Once I joked with them by replying that since they had asked me to choose the next topic, I had a right to select whatever topic I wanted without any explanation. The class erupted in protest. They said, "In our class, everyone

must explain their decisions!" Participatory democracy requires dialogue, while dialogue requires voluntary participation and students' ownership of their education. In my judgment, this demand by the students reflects the weakening of institutional authoritarian power, at least in this class, the fading away of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship, and the arrival of democratic decision making.

PITFALLS OF BENEVOLENT DICTATORSHIP

Even if it can be justified, the teacher's benevolent dictatorship can be abused, and the teacher's belief in its benevolence encourages an ideological cover-up of this abuse. Benevolent dictatorship can promote the teacher's corruption, philosophical distortions, pedagogical failures, and even blunt abuse of power.

First, the teacher's corruption involves using the benevolent dictatorship for justifying the teacher's own benefits at the expense of the students. For example, many conventional institutions of higher education nowadays demand from the teacher a promotion of credentialism, meritocracy, summative assessment, and, recently, strict surveillance of student attendance in their classes (as a condition for getting federal educational grants or loans). Rejecting or compromising these demands by the teacher may undermine the teacher's institutional survival or promotion. The teacher might be tempted to include these authoritarian institutional demands as a part of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship.

Second, the teacher's benevolent dictatorship is prone to promoting philosophical distortions in the teacher. Since the second aspect of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship is aimed at promoting students' engagement in authentic education, it can be easily transformed into social engineering of progressive education. As I argued elsewhere, progressive education believes that "...any subject could be taught to any child at any age in some form that was honest" (Bruner 1986, p. 129). Thus, it is the teacher's unconditional responsibility to find a way to teach every student what the teacher and/or the society think important for the students to learn. The main pedagogical question of progressive education becomes how to develop this "honest teaching" and make the student want to study what the teacher chooses for the student to study. The holy grail of progressive education is the creation of an educational vortex (cf. the notion of "double psychologizing", Dewey 1902) that will suck all students into the studied subject matter (Matusov et al. 2019). By making

the teacher responsible for the educational outcomes, progressive education undermines the core belief of democratic education that the students are the final and ultimate authority for their own education (Klag 1994). In my view, progressive education promotes a wrong pedagogical desire to make all students engage in genuine education rather than to offer the student a taste of it so that the student can start making informed decisions (Matusov 2021, in press). Let me explain the difference between progressive education and democratic education in my understanding with the following analogy.

When I was a little boy, I disliked smoked fish because it looked and smelled repulsive. At the same time, I loved dark chocolate candies. Once, my parents suggested me to take a few bites of a smoked fish in exchange for chocolate candy. After some trepidation, I agreed. When I tasted a smoked fish, I loved it. I did not need any bribe to eat it—smoked fish became one of my favorite dishes. My parents' bribe worked as an encouragement for me to test whether I really dislike smoked fish or not. Their goal was not to make me eat smoked fish but only to test my visual repulsion. Similarly, in my view, the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for democratic education is aimed at engaging students in tasting genuine education. If they like it, they can start taking ownership for it. If not, they have a legitimate right to disengage. In contrast, progressive education uses its impositions to make all students like the unfolding education.

Third, the teacher's benevolent dictatorship can inhibit a self-correcting process and thus makes the class arrangement insensitive to the students' individual or collective needs. It aims at suppressing students' "wrong" desires—the desires coming from their authoritarian past that the teacher might see as educationally wrong. But it might also suppress the students' "right" desires for educational self-determination and mask emerging pedagogical problems. For example, once I had a graduate seminar on the contexts for learning, with almost 20 doctoral students enrolled. At one point in the semester, I noticed dissatisfaction among a small group of the students in regard to the topics that their peers chose by majority votes. It took me a while to realize that I had three more or less stable groups in the class. The groups were defined by the scientific paradigms they espoused. The biggest group espoused the so-called "cognitive, information-processing" paradigm of comparing the human mind with a computer, while another, smaller, group espoused the so-called "sociocultural" paradigm of insisting that the human mind is shaped by culture, society, and institutions (Matusov 2007). The

third group was uncommitted and in-between. The composition of the class gave a systematic prioritization to the cognitive paradigm over the sociocultural paradigm in selecting the class topics. My original unilateral pedagogical design of the class, based on a selection of one topic by a majority—i.e., my benevolent dictatorship—was insensitive to the educational needs and interests of the second, smaller, student group interested in the sociocultural paradigm and its particular curricular topics. When I realized that, I brought this problem to the class, and we decided to have two topics for each class at the same time, forming two groups who studied two different topics embedded in two distinguishable paradigms. In-between students had a choice of joining either of these two groups. It seemed to solve the problem. Later, this issue on an individual, rather than on a group, level forced us to develop the notion of “asynchronous virtual attendance,” where students could stay at home to study a topic of their own interest different from the interest of the class.

In my view, although the teacher’s benevolent dictatorship might be necessary in some cases, it is always pregnant with pedagogical and educational insensitivities. For example, students can always change their attitude toward their own role in the class, while my current design insists that the students make up their mind within the 5-week grace period. The worst-case scenario is when teachers overcommit to their benevolent dictatorship at the expense of the students’ individual or collective needs, interests, and freedoms and rationalize their own pedagogical failures by blaming and shaming students and by making the students’ resistance to the benevolent dictatorship illegitimate (see Matusov and Brobst 2013, for our description and analysis of this case). When that happens, the dictatorship stops being benevolent and becomes outright malevolent.

Finally, the teacher’s benevolent dictatorship for democratic education can lead to blunt abuse of teacher power. For example, in the past, when running the class as an entirely Opening Syllabus pedagogical regime, I was grading and provided formative feedback on my students’ Main Learning Projects according to my judgment of the quality of their work. When my authorial judgments went along with the students’ educational desires and visions for their own work, this feedback and grading worked well. However, when we were in discord, my feedback and especially rubrics-based grading became oppressive and abusive. By using the institutional authoritarian power of grading, I tacitly demanded my students to unconditionally please me. Of course, they had a right to argue with

me, but it was always up to me to accept or reject their arguments. Essentially, it was “my way or the highway” to lower their final grade for the class. This violation of trust in democratic dialogic education and in me as their democratic dialogic teacher at the end of the semester was often heartbreaking. I agree with Duberman, who argued that “only when the necessity to please others is removed, can the main job of self-evaluation begin” (Duberman 1969, p. 260). I had to redesign my feedback and grading to address this problem of built-in abuse of the teacher power by making my feedback and grading a student’s choice along with their own and peer feedback and grading.

Currently, I think that the teacher’s benevolent dictatorship for democratic education has to be limited to organizational-relational issues and not go into the realm of ideas, values, or attitudes. Students should feel free to express any ideas, values, and attitudes as much as possible—only when these ideas, values, and attitudes lead to relational crises should the limitations on students’ free speech and expression be considered. Teachers must not impose their cherished ideas on the students in the name of the objective truth, social justice, or some other reasons. I believe that students’ free examination of ideas, values, attitudes, and desires in a critical dialogue should be promoted and prioritized.

In sum, I argue that the teacher’s benevolent dictatorship for democratic education can create opportunities, conditions, rationalizations, and temptations for hijacking the democratic spirit of educational governance and for the overt or covert establishment of educational authoritarianism.

CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, I have argued that the main goal of the teacher’s benevolent dictatorship for democratic dialogic education, situated in a conventional university, is to give students a taste of genuine education as the precursor of students’ ownership of their own education and democratic governance of it. When there is a critical mass of students in a class who have experienced genuine intrinsic education—who are deeply interested in the subject matter, have enough time and energy free from other demands, and assume the role of autodidacts—the teacher’s benevolent dictatorship for democratic education is probably unnecessary. For example, this is how one autodidact student articulated her gratitude for an opportunity to define her own learning: “The most exciting/unique feature of the class was the ability to create or modify your own learning journey. This

helped me to tailor my learning to subjects relevant and helpful to me, and I could not be more grateful for the opportunity." This student did not seem to need any benevolent dictatorship from the teacher. When present in the class meetings, these autodidact students can guide each other and non-autodidact students, who might need extra help in organizing their own learning. Even more, at times, the autodidacts can become benevolent dictators for alienated students who need a taste of genuine education. In some cases, a benevolent dictatorship for democratic education can be shared between the teacher and those autodidact students. When there is no critical mass of these autodidact students, those few can be excused from the teacher's benevolent dictatorship through multiple pedagogical regimes in the class I briefly described above, especially through the Open Syllabus pedagogical regime that autodidact students can choose. However, one big challenge that remains unaddressed in my pedagogical practice so far is that individual students, alienated from and inexperienced with authentic, intrinsic, or autodidact education, may need different forms and levels of benevolent dictatorship at different times and with different curricular topics to get a taste of genuine education.

NOTES

1. Martin Duberman, *Midlife Queer: Autobiography of a Decade, 1971–1981* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 57.
2. There is similar reasoning emerging in environmental education. Instead of focusing on ecological problems and man-made catastrophes (as is often done), focus on students' enjoyment and appreciation of nature (Yang 2015).
3. I suspect that the students who choose Open Syllabus have diverse motivations, and they might change during the semester. Some of the Open Syllabus students might be autodidacts, some are lurkers, some might want to guarantee an A grade, and some might be "prisoners of education" seeking high grades.

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