Beyond the Lecture Hall: Fostering Soft Skills in Malaysian University Students through a Democratic Classroom

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate how democratic classrooms can help to foster students' soft skills. The study employs a qualitative methodology, specifically adopting a case study technique. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with six Malaysian university students. The data were analysed through thematic analysis. The results indicate that a democratic classroom has the ability to enhance students' soft skills. Moreover, it can also improve students' critical thinking skills. This study suggests that instructors should ensure that the learning environment significantly influences students' soft skills. The findings of this study contribute towards the body of knowledge relating to the promotion of more democratic teaching and learning in the context of Malaysian higher education.
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1.   Introduction

In recent years, the concept of democracy has increasingly permeated in various spheres of society, including education. The democratic classroom, characterized by principles of inclusivity, participation, and equity, also stands as a hallmark of progressive pedagogy. Within the context of Malaysian higher education, the pursuit of democratic ideals in the classroom holds particular significance. Universities strive to foster critical thinking, active citizenship, and social responsibility among the students. However, despite the growing recognition of the importance of democratic education, there remains a notable gap in understanding the specific characteristics and practices that define a democratic classroom within Malaysian university settings.

The democratic classroom approach is commonly employed in western countries and certain regions 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 fosters an environment where students can freely express their views and personal encounters to others in the class. Teacher creates an engaging environment that prevents students from feeling inhibited by hesitancy. Democratic classrooms facilitate the empowerment of students by exposing them to new perspectives within the classroom community and fostering their critical awareness as active citizens. It is important to mention that the instructor assumes the position of a member inside the classroom community. The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (2006) advocates for a student-centred approach to teaching and learning, fostering interaction and the cultivation of soft skills.

According to Lee (1999), providing students with an opportunity to engage in this method would enhance their ability to think critically. In addition, a democratic classroom provides students with the advantage of becoming employable in the future (Idrus, Mohd Dahan, & Abdullah, 2009; Song & Yuen, 2008).

A study conducted by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education in 2017 found that university graduates have deficiencies in communication, interpersonal skill, problem-solving, teamwork, critical thinking, and creative thinking abilities. A series of studies conducted by various researchers have shown that a significant number of Malaysian graduates are deficient in a fundamental soft skill known as critical thinking skills (Md Yunus, Tarmizi, Abu, Md Nor, Ismail, Wan Ali & Abu Bakar, 2006; Shakir, 2009; Song & Yuen, 2008; Yelasmanchili, 2018; Husaina Banu, Nor Aziah, & Abdul Rahman, 2019; Ilhaamie, Rosmawani, & Yusmini, 2018; Mohd Sobri & Mohamad Khairi, 2020). In addition, according to Md Zabit (2010), the primary objective of higher educational institutions in Malaysia is to enhance the analytical and logical reasoning abilities of their graduates. The Malaysian government expresses apprehension regarding the instructional methods employed within schools (Saleh & Aziz, 2012). Nevertheless, Malaysian educators are compelled to complete the curriculum and ensure that the graduates achieve high grades and secure job prospects (Sarina, 2014). Moreover, certain students encounter challenges when it comes to fostering positive self-improvement. This can result in problems such as academic underperformance, diminished self-esteem, difficulties in forming positive connections with peers, as well as harbouring negative thoughts and misconceptions about the classroom environment (Asma, Hazalizah, & Fatanah, 2020; Amar Hisham, Rajadurai, Hazril Izwar, & Sadiq, 2019; Kotera & Ting, 2021).

On the other hand, the former Minister of Higher Education stated that university students exhibit deficiencies in communication skills, an inability to adjust to professional environments, and a dearth of critical thinking abilities (Metro Harian, 18 April 2012). Thus, it is imperative for university students to alter their perspective, recognizing that exceptional academic performance and certificates are not the core of noteworthy accomplishments. Instead, they should focus on equipping themselves with pertinent abilities and striving to become well-rounded individuals, as this is the true measure of achievement. This type of stigma must be altered to ensure that Malaysian graduates possess innovative ideas and can make substantial contributions to the country, particularly in terms of generating future wealth.

In 2005, the Ministry of Human Resources conducted a survey, followed by a survey by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2006. Both surveys revealed that the primary cause of unemployability is a deficiency in communication skills, specifically oral abilities. In the democratic classroom, students are granted the freedom to actively participate, thereby equipping them with the skills to become active participants in society. Once students become engaged, they possess a clear understanding and awareness of their desired areas of knowledge, enabling them to actively shape their own learning process. The democratic classroom is a modern educational model that allows students to collaboratively enhance learning frameworks, leading to the transformation of knowledge for their own learning. Hence, this study investigates how democratic classrooms can help foster soft skills among Malaysian students.

2.   Literature Review

John Dewey, a renowned advocate of progressive educational theories, made substantial contributions to the advancement of democratic teaching methods (Davis, 2010). Incorporating democratic teaching methods into school curricula can be highly advantageous for educational institutions (Mosher, Kenny, & Garrod, 1994). Dewey (as referenced in Tyack, 1997) contended that it is essential to not just offer education in a democratic society, but also to incorporate democratic ideas within the educational system itself. The incorporation of young individuals into the political dimensions of public education is crucial for their well-being. To instil democratic values in future generations, it is advisable to empower students through the practice of "democratic discourse". Dewey's notion of democratic discourse-oriented classrooms advocates for experiential learning and fosters students' inclination to contemplate their experiences. He emphasized the significance of teachers efficiently harnessing students' intellectual capacities, which has a good effect on the student-teacher dynamic and improves the entire learning experience.

This instructional approach greatly improves students' cognitive and moral growth by promoting collaborative learning through the distribution of power in the classroom. To successfully adopt power-sharing, it is essential for the instructor to establish a classroom environment that is both supportive and constructive. Conventional teaching approaches frequently lead to passive learning experiences, while it is crucial for the teacher to introduce active learning strategies. Granting students the liberty to express their thoughts and opinions within the classroom fosters an environment where the instructor may gain insight into each student's individuality and diverse viewpoints. This method not only encourages active participation but also facilitates the creation of a more inclusive and dynamic learning atmosphere.

When students are actively engaged as stakeholders in their educational process, they demonstrate a variety of enduring and applicable learning styles. Democratic classrooms cultivate a sense of ownership among students, as they become active participants in their learning experiences. This method advocates for the notion that learning is a cooperative endeavour including both educators and learners, rather than a unilateral dissemination of knowledge from teacher to student. A democratic classroom fosters student empowerment through the provision of rights and the promotion of active involvement in decision-making processes pertaining to teaching and learning. This paradigm promotes a bilateral exchange of ideas, enabling significant engagements between educators and learners and empowering students to actively participate in defining the educational process (Muhammad Thoyibi, Mauly, & Aryati, 2021). Consequently, the classroom atmosphere becomes more inclusive and dynamic, thereby improving student engagement and learning results.

A comprehensive investigation has been carried out on the democratic classroom; yet the majority of these studies have focused on western contexts. Ahmad et al. (2014) emphasised the study conducted by Sylvester (2003), which examined the differences in perceptions of democratic classrooms between rural and urban environments. Sylvester's research suggests that participants perceived democratic classrooms as fostering a more favourable and friendly learning atmosphere, resulting in a positive influence on students' cognitive growth when compared to traditional classes. Similarly, Gutherie and Cox (2001) discovered that students exhibited a notable inclination towards problem-solving when placed in democratic educational environments, leading to a considerable improvement in their cognitive abilities. In addition, Kubow and Kinney (2000) delineated eight fundamental attributes of democratic classrooms: reflective cognition, active involvement, deliberation of contentious matters, decision-making, engagement in activities beyond textbooks, logical reasoning, informed accountability, and mutual esteem among students. These features collectively enhance the dynamism and intellectual stimulation of the learning environment.

The classroom functions as a critical environment for both knowledge acquisition and social interaction, fostering students' social development through engagement with peers and teachers (Ahmad et al., 2014). According to Oakes and Lipton (2002), participation in discussions within a democratic classroom setting enhances students' awareness and fosters a sense of personal agency. Furthermore, Furman and Starratt (2002) assert that democratic classrooms are instrumental in developing students' questioning skills and their ability to effectively respond to inquiries from both teachers and classmates. Supporting these findings, Ahmad et al. (2014) demonstrated that democratic classroom settings significantly correlate with heightened student engagement, encompassing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. These studies collectively underscore the importance of democratic principles in educational environments for promoting active participation and comprehensive student development.

Goomansingh (2009) contended that a democratic classroom ought to establish a setting in which students can participate in collaborative decision-making without any reluctance, enabling them to openly articulate their viewpoints and convictions. This environment promotes hands-on learning, investigation, analytical thinking, and assessment. Rainer and Guyton (1999) found successful democratic practices in a graduate teacher preparation programme and analysed their influence in classroom settings. The researchers discovered that the notion of dialogue in democratic classrooms encompasses the subject matter of the lessons, the principles of constructivist teaching, the establishment of a feeling of community, and the imperative for educators to incorporate genuine assessments. Their research emphasised the beneficial impact of democratic teaching methods on students' perspectives towards school and the process of learning. Ashraf (2016) further highlighted that a democratic classroom is contingent upon the teacher-student connection and the overall teaching and learning process. She observed that democratic classrooms facilitate vigorous student engagement and

emphasised the "power dimension" that necessitates teachers to be cognizant of and tackle the power dynamics between them and their pupils. Macmath (2008) witnessed a classroom that exemplified Dewey's three democratic principles: the belief in the equal moral worth of every individual, the emphasis on the rationality and enlightened thinking of each person, and the promotion of collaborative problem-solving skills among pupils. These studies emphasise the significance of promoting democratic values in educational settings to improve student involvement and learning outcomes.

The previous evaluations emphasise the need to improve the teaching and learning methods at Malaysian public institutions to cultivate empowered students who can boldly tackle global issues. Despite the abundance of research, educators frequently persist in utilising teacher-centric teaching approaches. Studies continually emphasise the substantial influence of democratic teaching methods in empowering students inside the Malaysian public university system. Research conducted in western contexts, such as the studies conducted by Edwards (2010), Ellsworth (1999), Ferguson-Patrick (2012), Gentile (2014), Goomansingh (2009), Hur, Glassman, and Kim (2013), Kocoska (2009), Morrison (2008), and Venter and Higgs (2014), demonstrate a wide range of viewpoints and issues regarding democratic classrooms. The studies mentioned focus on several goals, such as promoting civic education, character education, group learning, moral development, and social skills (Garapick, 1995; Villafranca, 2002; Tonga, 2014; Ahmad et al., 2014). Goomansingh (2009) argues that although there is some existing research on non-critical pedagogical methods, there is an urgent need for more exploration into restructuring teaching and learning to meet the democratic requirement in university classrooms (p. 28). These studies collectively support the idea of adopting more democratic educational procedures to adequately equip students for the intricacies of the contemporary world.

Constructivism is an educational framework that emphasises the cognitive part which individuals engage in to develop their own understanding of reality. This framework is based on the works of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky's social constructivism highlights the significance of the social and cultural environment in which learning unfolds and how this environment influence learners (Do, Do, Nguyen, 2023). Vygotsky's theory also highlights the function of teachers to scaffold learners moving away from teacher-centred learning. Therefore, the constructivist learning approach revolves around activities, methods and a classroom environment that include students in constructing meaning and knowledge while teachers guide students rather than solely deliver information (Zajda, 2011; Pan, Hung, Bai, 2023). Within the constructivist approach to learning is the Constructivist Learning Environment (CLE) which promotes and applies a democratic learning environment (Golder, 2018). CLE is a student-centred learning approach where students fosters independent learning with negotiated learning strategies as students can request for activities, make decisions, and have discussions with the teacher and classmates. Therefore, this study delves into the complex dynamics of a democratic learning environment within the framework of Collaborative Learning Environment (CLE) and looks at how it impacts students' soft-skills in Malaysian graduates.

3.   Research Methodology

This research utilises a qualitative methodology, specifically adopting a case study technique. Yin (2003) defines the case study technique as an empirical investigation that examines a current occurrence inside its real-life environment. This approach aims to thoroughly explore the phenomenon within its actual setting. The main method used to collect data was semi-structured interviews, which were complemented by a study of journals to further enrich the information gathered from the interviews. In addition, several video recordings obtained from classroom observations were used to obtain a full understanding of the sessions. The lecturers' field notes provided further support to these video recordings. The selection of these approaches was done to achieve data triangulation, which is a widely used technique in qualitative research (Anderson, 2010).

This analysis employed two distinct categories of journals. The initial category consisted of the researcher's daily journal, which documented her simultaneous responsibilities as both a researcher and a teacher. The researcher kept reflective notebooks following each teaching session and recorded field notes throughout class breaks. The second form of journal recording originated from the students, who expressed their emotions and recounted their encounters with the democratic classroom style. A total of twenty-seven students willingly handed in their journals, providing valuable insights following their involvement in the researcher's democratic classroom. A considerable number of students discovered

that writing was a preferable and convenient means of communication in contrast to interviewing. The journals were utilised to establish the accuracy of the data gathered from the interviews through triangulation.

The classroom consisted of 27 students, consisting of 11 males and 16 females, all enrolled in a Bachelor of Education programme with a specialisation in Guidance and Counselling in a public university in Malaysia. The researcher organised the classroom seating in a semi-circle to provide a favourable atmosphere for a democratic classroom, in contrast to the conventional row sitting arrangement where students face the teacher. The purpose of this arrangement was to promote a sense of individuality and equality among students by positioning them in a way that they could directly face one another.

The democratic classroom approach, adapted to the specific conditions of Malaysia, engaged students in a range of activities including arguing, questioning, exchanging views, displaying mutual respect, and writing reflective diaries following each lesson. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with six student volunteers. The selection of participants was based on their prior experience with the democratic classroom approach in the course "Methods of Teaching Moral Education". The interviews were recorded in audio format, while ensuring ethical principles were followed, such as obtaining informed consent from participants and maintaining confidentiality by using pseudonyms. Thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed audio recordings.

4. Findings

The study utilised thematic analysis on the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews. The same method of analysis was applied on all the 22 journals submitted by the students. Source of data were also supplemented with the educator's journals and field notes taken from the video recordings. Table 1 displays the themes obtained from the interviews. Meanwhile, Table 2 is drawn from students' journals.

Table 1

Themes and Sub-Themes of Individual Interviews

Num.	THEMES	SUB-THEMES	
1.	Enhancement of thinking skills	i)	Stimulate thinking
		ii)	Improve critical thinking skills
2.	Personal Growth	i)	Feeling of being acknowledged
		ii)	More confident

Table 2

Themes and Sub-Themes of Students' Journals

Num.	THEMES	SUB-THEMES	
1.	Enhancement in thinking skills	i)	Enhanced creative thinking skills
2.	Self-Improvement	i)	Self-growth
		ii)	Improve manners

The data obtained from the students' interviews were firstly analysed separately. Subsequently, common themes from both data sources were reviewed and conclusively merged. Based on the data analysis, two major themes were found in this study: enhancement of thinking skills and self enhancement. These two major themes were further divided into several sub-themes, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Merged Themes, Sub-Themes and Source of Data

Num.	MAJOR THEMES	SUB THEMES	SOURCE OF DATA
1.	Improvement in thinking skill	i) Enhance critical thinking skills ii) Stimulate thinking iii) Improve creative thinking skills	Interview, journal, field notes Interview, journal Journal, field notes
2.	Self Enhancement	i) Enhanced confidence level ii) Improving manner iii) Enhanced communication skill	Interview, journal Journal, field notes Journal, field notes Interview, journal

Theme One: Improvement in Thinking Skills

Table 4

Improvement in Thinking skills

Num.	MAJOR THEMES	SUB THEMES
1.	Improvement in thinking skills	i) Enhanced critical thinking skills ii) Stimulate thinking

Table 4 presents the first major theme that was discovered from the data was improvement in thinking skills. Under this theme, two (2) subthemes, 'stimulate thinking' and 'enhanced thinking skills' emerged.

Enhanced Critical Thinking Skill

The interview participants responded that the democratic classroom approach helps them improve their thinking skills. Suhaimi commented that the democratic teaching approach enhanced his thinking skills via interaction, such as discussing the issues. It is helpful for him because, to get an idea, he must think. The excerpt from his interview is as follows:

Democratic teaching approach helps a lot in my thinking skills because through discussion and freedom of speech. Students can see the issue from various perspectives. (Suhaimi, DU 3)

In the meantime, for Mifqiah, being asked many open questions is one factor that developed her thinking skills. She also added that the democratic classroom approach that she and her classmates experienced was different from other teaching styles. She highlighted that the teacher gave them a short story to expand their ideas, which required them to exercise their thinking. The evidence from the conversation is as follows:

This approach can enhance my thinking skills because you always ask us a lot of questions. So, this approach can enhance my thinking skills. Because you always asked open-ended questions, I can see that everyone is eager to write on the whiteboard. It is how I can see this method can enhance everyone is thinking skills. Unlike before, we just received the knowledge in one-way

communication, the teacher talking alone, and we jot down the notes…along the day just receiving the knowledge. Your approach in teaching is quite different, which is you gave us a short story, we can generate and expand the ideas through thinking using the short story, and we also can discuss it very well… (Mifqiah, DU 38)

Furthermore, one of the participants mentioned that their thinking skills were enhanced through the Socratic Method that the teacher applied in the classroom. For him, the teacher's questioning technique made them practice their cognitive capacity by thinking about sound arguments while debating during the teaching and learning session. He wrote in his journal as follows:

We can empower and enhance our thinking skills through logical reasoning by encouraging the exploration of thinking comprehensively. While the curiosity about the context. The question technique also helps in developing critical thinking, and it is interesting as well. Creativity is the ability to create something new from existing knowledge and innovate. The Socratic method was also beneficial to empower one's thoughts. It encourages us to think by developing construct in learning something. For example, the dialogue session and debate between the classroom community; they debate with the excellent quality argument. (AHMJ02)

Stimulate Thinking

The participants agreed that the democratic classroom approach stimulated their thinking. During the teaching and learning process, they said that this approach helped them to think outside of the box. The participants started to think about things that are not in the syllabus but are still related to the learning topic and to achieve the 'out-of-the-box' thinking, students acknowledged the need to stimulate their thoughts, and they realised changes to their cognition when they started to apply active thinking.

In their effort to complete the syllabus, teachers would adhere to the textbook, but this approach is less engaging and stimulating for students' thinking. This differs from the democratic classroom approach, which does not strictly follow the textbook syllabus and consequently stimulates students' thinking. Abu, in his interview, concluded that the democratic classroom approach stimulated his thinking to practice thinking out of the box. His excerpt is as follows:

In my opinion, this teaching approach helps us a lot to think out of the box. (Abu, DU 109)

Haaaa..meaning that... we are not too attached with the syllabus. (Abu, DU 107)

In addition, Sarah also added by stimulating their thinking. She could see the improvement to their cognitive development as well. She stated that:

From there, the change that positive change that I can see is in the aspect of the cognitive (Sarah, DU 108)

Theme Two: Self Enhancement

Table 5

Self Enhancement

Num.	MAJOR THEME	SUB-THEME
1.	Self enhancement	i) Enhanced confidence level
		ii) Improve manners
		iii) Strengthen communication skills
		iv) Feeling being acknowledged

Another theme was generated is self-improvement (Table 5). In this finding, there are four (4) subthemes of personal growth that had been obtained from the interviewee. Those four sub-themes are enhanced confidence level, improve manners, strengthen communication skills and feeling being acknowledged.

Enhanced Confidence Level

A few students have embraced enhancing their confidence level while experiencing as they wrote in their journal. Their confidence level had increased, and they also felt appreciated. In addition, their communication skills were also enhanced because they were able to practice speaking their thoughts. In the aspect of confidence level, when students were given a chance to talk and be heard while talking, their confidence level raised. It can be seen from the students' journal who wrote,

> *...feel more confident to speak and feel appreciated and acknowledging when everyone pays attention (NFFJ01).*

Meanwhile, Sarah's confidence level increased when she experienced the democratic classroom approach in teaching and learning. Sarah became more confident since she observed that the teacher acknowledged everyone who spoke up during the lessons. Therefore, she felt safe, and this made her wanted to speak as she saw that her peers did not hesitate to speak up in giving out their ideas in the discussions. The evidence of Sarah's claim is as follows:

> *When you come and teach us, I feel more confident. (Sarah, DU 78). Because of what? Because you heard all saying by all students without stopped me and others from speak up. Therefore, I feel so confident to speak up. (DU 322)*

It also gave students a great experience when they become braver during teaching and learning sessions. Student SNFJ01 mentions it in her journal, which she claims that

> *This experience produces the amazing spirit of brave. (SNFJ01)*

Improving Manner

A few participants wrote that they had to put their hands up when they or their peers wanted to talk, ask a question or give an opinion. It indicates that they observed good manner while in the classroom community. One of the students wrote,

> *For example, many students raise their hand to give the answer and idea for the questions given by colleagues or teacher (SRFJ01).*

In a social context, raising a hand to speak is a type of proper manner as it shows respect and patience while taking turns to speak. This action can be seen clearly in this course because at the beginning, the teacher asked the students to raise their hands if they wanted to speak. Amazingly, they could follow the rules, preventing any chaos from happening during teaching and learning. One of the students wrote,

> *Each of the students are free and given a chance to speak up anything when the teaching and learning session occur by raising their hand (MZJ02).*

Therefore, students improved their manner in terms of taking turns to talk by raising their hand and waiting until the other person to finish their words before speaking. These activities can instil a sense of respect during the classroom interaction where when one person is speaking, the others will be listening, and if they want to interrupt, they raise their hand politely.

Enhanced Communication Skill

Another element that enhanced students' individual personal skills, which led to their self-worth is communication skills. Communication skill is one of the soft skills that has been highlighted in 21st-century teaching and learning. Through a democratic classroom, students were encouraged to speak up, debate, and think out loud. All these actions contribute to individual personal skills. As one of the students wrote in her journal, she claimed that "Students can enhance their communication skills and give an opinion about the issues that had been discussed in the classroom" (RFJ01). Thus, it can be concluded that a democratic classroom made students embrace their self-worth, such as enhancing confidence level, feeling appreciated and acknowledged by the community in the classroom, and improving their communication skills.

Feeling Acknowledged

Elmyra shared her thoughts about how the democratic classroom approach made her feel appreciated. She also believed that this approach significantly impacted her self-growth, especially to feel accepted when she expressed her ideas in the teaching and learning session.

Ahh... I felt welcomed or, in other words, like being appreciated. (Elmyra, DU 116)

Although my point of view might not sound logical when I talked and being appreciated so much, it is a huge benefit for me. (Elmyra, DU 118)

The democratic classroom approach made Elmyra feel more valued as she thought that she was being appreciated. Although, she said that sometimes her points might not be sound and when the opinion that she brought up got the attention of the teacher and some friends, she felt so satisfied, and this encouraged her to become a better person by developing her self-growth. It is supported by one of the claims that another student wrote in her journal, in which she admitted that the teacher also played an essential role in advocating students to embrace themselves through discussion in the classroom. She further wrote that

This makes student feels appreciated. The teacher acknowledges each opinion given by students. It also makes me feel more confident to speak up in the classroom (RFAJ01).

Being heard when talking is one of the ways for a person to enhance their self-confidence. Prior to this approach, some students used to be shy in the classroom. Later, they overcame their shyness through the democratic approach in this course. One of the students wrote,

This teaching method makes the student feel more appreciated by the teacher and overcome the fear and shy to talk (NHFJ01).

This is another response of self-worth that had been identified, which is students gain the sense of being brave through this course through the democratic classroom approach. Thus, it can be concluded that a democratic classroom made students embrace their self-enhancement, such as enhancing confidence level, feeling appreciated and acknowledged by the community in the classroom, and improving their communication skills.

Example of Academic Discourse with an element of Democratic Classroom Environment

The dialogues between the lecturer and the students in the classroom exemplify the establishment of a democratic learning environment, where student participation, open discussion, and mutual respect are central. Throughout the sessions, the researcher consistently encouraged students to voice their opinions, ask questions, and engage in critical thinking, fostering a climate of shared decision-making in the classroom. For instance, during the first session, after initiating a question about the distinction between Moral Education and Akhlaq in Islamic Education, the lecturer facilitated a

dynamic exchange of ideas. When student SHF02 responded to the lecturer's query by explaining that Akhlaq and Moral Education may share similarities but differ in their religious implications, the lecturer invited others to share their opinions, stating, "Does everyone agree with what SHF02 said?" This open-ended inquiry invited students to engage in a discussion, rather than simply providing a right or wrong answer, which reflects a core tenet of democratic pedagogy—encouraging diverse perspectives and critical dialogue.

Additionally, the lecturer's response to SHF02's comment, "Okay, good explanation. Anyone else wants to give an opinion?" further underscores the lecturer's commitment to creating an inclusive classroom where students feel comfortable expressing dissenting views. The dialogue continued to evolve as other students, such as MRM01, contributed their thoughts, saying, "I agree with SHF02 because we as Muslims are encouraged to follow the Sunnah," illustrating that the classroom was a space where students were free to disagree, agree, and elaborate on their viewpoints. In another session on teaching approaches in Moral Education, the lecturer's approach remained similarly democratic. When NHF01 expressed disagreement with the promotion of student-centred learning, arguing that some subjects, like Mathematics and Physics, might not suit this approach, the lecturer responded with encouragement: "Okay, you did bring this lesson out of context, but it's good because you can think it out of context." The lecturer then invited other students to respond, maintaining a discussion that allowed for diverse opinions to emerge and be explored. This respectful exchange not only validated NHF01's view but also encouraged other students to voice their own perspectives. The lecturer further reinforced the democratic classroom atmosphere by praising students for speaking up, thus fostering an environment where students felt appreciated for their contributions. For example, when the students discussed the concept of Functionalism by Emile Durkheim, the lecturer refrained from simply providing a correct answer, instead allowing students to contribute freely and even relate the concept to real-life situations. The dialogue took a student-driven form when one student likened the roles in society to a social hierarchy, while another student emphasized the importance of fulfilling one's responsibilities, reflecting how the classroom encouraged students to build on each other's ideas.

In the next session, the students were tasked with asking open-ended questions about a text and engaging in philosophical inquiry. When one student posed a question about whether it was acceptable to break rules in certain situations, the lecturer encouraged further discussion by saying, "Okay, good explanation. Anyone else wants to give an opinion?" This allowed for the exploration of diverse viewpoints, reinforcing the principle that all opinions are valid and worthy of consideration in the classroom.

5.   Discussion

Allowing students' voices to be heard is a characteristic of a democratic approach in a Malaysian classroom. Students are encouraged to speak in this approach to make them feel that their opinions are appreciated and valued. In the beginning of the democratic classroom approach, only a few students raised their hands to speak their opinion. However, the instructor constantly encourages the other students to speak and try to argue whether they agree with their friend's opinion or not. If they agreed, they were further asked for justification; if they disagreed, they needed to state their arguments. After students had experienced the democratic classroom approach, it is discovered that the students loved how they were given a chance to speak by the instructor. Before the students participated in a democratic classroom approach, most of them were afraid of being rejected by the instructor and their friends if they started to speak in class. Thus, they liked how they dealt with the situation where they had to agree or to disagree during the teaching and learning session. Students felt free to speak up about what was in their minds, and they knew that their friends also listen to them respectfully. Giving students the freedom to voice their opinions makes them gain meaningful learning and confidence level. Although teachers' knowledge of the lesson is significant, it is more important for the educator to know how to deliver meaningful learning experiences (Adeyinka, 2000).

In this study, some of the students felt that their learning was meaningful, which means that they were aware and conscious that the knowledge they acquired could be implemented in their real life. It was also observed that when they were in the discussion, students always got new insights from their peers, and some of the students started to articulate what they learnt during the teaching and learning process. The notion of participation in discussion is what Dewey and Freire consider as active

learning (Darwish, 2009) as the discussion is one of the attributes that contribute to the democratic environment, which offers meaning learning. For instance, students loved it when the instructor always asked them if there was any question that they wanted to ask. This is closely representing democracy in education regarding Dewey (Wolk, 1998). The instructor always asked questions during the teaching and learning because the instructor wanted the students to be clear with the knowledge they received, whether from the instructor or their peers. From there, students also admitted that they could give full attention in the classroom. This was where the students created their meaningful learning during the lesson.

In this study, the students are asked to ask a question based on the short story during the lesson. In the beginning, they asked factual question where the answer is in the text. Later, the educator asks them to ask the question that does not have the answer in the passage, and the answer can be discussed. After a while, it is found that they asked the 'thinking question' where at this point, they are encouraged to reflect on the question and challenged the 'argument' by their friends in a democratic way. This finding can be seen that a democratic classroom does enhance students' thinking skills. In this approach, students were given a chance to ask questions. Most of the questions that were asked were in the higher-order thinking category. When students are queried higher order thinking questions, they articulated their thinking first before asking the question. Other than that, students' thinking was also stimulated through the discussions in the classroom (Siti Fairuz et al., 2022). When there were questions or issues raised in the lesson during teaching and learning, students had to actively think to gain ideas to participate in the classroom discourse. Freire's (1973) philosophy of education, which aims to improve students' thoughts by raising critical consciousness, encourages questions in the classroom. It also gives students a chance to communicate, such as teacher-student and student-student communication. This was where students practised their thinking to contribute to the lessons during teaching and learning.

Therefore, students' thoughts were enhanced through the democratic classroom by practising their minds to think in the classroom session. Besides, Freire also showed much concern about the importance of "liberating dialogue" (p.65) between both teacher and students, indicating that both parties share the power and autonomy in the classroom. Freire (1974) proposed the dialogical and problem-posing approach because he wanted students to engage and develop critical thinking skills. To have a democratic classroom, according to Freire's idea, a teacher who plays the role of a teacher needs to pose the problems or issues related to students' lives and society through dialogues. A teacher first needs to think in a democratic way to make his class more participatory. Only then can the students be active and critical thinkers.

After four sessions of the democratic classroom approach, the results also show that the students felt that they respect each other more in the classroom. As supported by Laguardia and Pearl (2005) that when the students have a say in the decision making, it improves students' leadership skill, build the mutual respect between the teachers and students, also can develop their sense of accountability. Students typically find it hard to respect others who differ in ideas, thoughts, and opinions, leading to chaos and conflict. Similarly, Moswela (2010) found that teaching and learning activities mainly take place in a democratic learning environment, where teachers negotiate key decisions with students in the classroom. Moreover, when they experience the democratic classroom, respecting each other was internalised, and they can sense it in themselves. As mentioned in the literature, the notion of a democratic classroom develops from the ideologies and practices of equality or democracy and in that way, it has spread towards the classroom setting (Ahmad et al., 2015; Lina Mursyidah et al., 2024). Wilmer (2006) claims that the democratic classroom builds a conducive learning environment where students feel free to participate in an equal position without any influence from the teacher's bias. Thus, it is essential to create or build a democratic environment learning to ensure students can experience a democratic classroom during their teaching and learning. Accordingly, students experienced a democratic environment in the democratic classroom during their teaching and learning. Students did not only feel the sense of a democratic classroom but also could give examples of a few characteristics of a democratic classroom, such as freedom of speech, asking questions freely and active interaction between each party in the classroom community.

Most participants responded that the democratic classroom approach positively impacted their thinking skills. For instance, one participant commented on how a democratic classroom stimulated his mind to think outside the box. This supports the idea that a democratic classroom approach promotes the enhancement of thinking skills where students can think differently and produce great ideas through

their thinking. Findings in this research aligns with Freire's idea of not applying the banking concept of education. Freire claimed that the banking concept of education happens when teachers "deposit" the knowledge to students, and students will "withdraw" them on the paper in the examination. Freire opposed this concept of education because it is traditional, where students cannot practice critical thinking. Shor (1992) also discussed that if the teacher uses a conventional approach in teaching and learning, the class discourse would be directed only in a one-way direction. In other words, only a teacher will 'transmit' knowledge. He added that traditional classrooms make students decrease their achievement by partially destroying their potential to be critical in their thinking. In addition, Macmath (2008) claimed that a democratic classroom was discovered through Dewey's three democratic elements: (1) everyone is morally equal, (2) everyone has the competency to be rational and enlightened, and (3) everyone knows how to solve problems collaboratively. This study and the literature show how important it is for the teacher to avoid traditional teaching methods and the need for using the teaching methods that can help students be critical in their thinking. As shown in findings, a democratic classroom empowers students' thoughts by enhancing their thinking skills, where they are critical and conscious of the lesson they will apply in their real lives.

The following finding is related to the students' personal growth when they experienced the democratic classroom approach. In the results presented, the democratic classroom approach gave the students several positive effects on their personal growth. She mentioned that she felt appreciated, or in other words, she could feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. She highlighted the term "huge benefit" because she was given a chance to be heard, and this made her feel like the classroom community appreciated her. This is in line with what Kesici (2008) discussed: for a classroom to be democratic, students should be given a chance to have their thought in discussions freely. Hence, it is essential to ensure that the classroom climate is safe for students to be 'free' in their discourse. Being 'free' makes the students feel safe and comfortable to give their opinion. A safe feeling while participating in the classroom discourse will also provide the student sense of appreciation.

On another note, building self-confidence is also one of the findings obtained from the interview and journal of the participants. It is found that the democratic classroom also benefitted the student in terms of their confidence level. Moreover, the student tried to highlight that her confidence level has increased. Other than that, the role of the instructor who applies democratic teaching is also crucial. Without support from the teacher, the students might not express themselves freely, which is when they develop their confidence level. Apart from that, Shor (1992) also argued that a teacher should motivate their students to engage in the classroom by 'inviting' them to share their thoughts and contribute to the learning session. When the teacher listens to the students, it opens a broader space for them to be more confident while sharing different views and encourages them to contribute fascinating ideas.

6.   Contribution to Knowledge

The study uses the idea from Freire on the concept of the democratic classroom and the democratic education from Dewey. This study employs the view from these two prominent scholars by adopting the characteristics of a democratic classroom to enhance Malaysian graduates' soft skills. The findings of this study contribute towards the body of knowledge relating to the promotion of more democratic teaching and learning in the context of Malaysian higher education. Based on the results of this research, the democratic classroom approach can enhance students' soft skills.

7.   Recommendations for Future Study

In accordance with the perspective of Malaysian university students who are experiencing the democratic classroom approach, the results indicate that a democratic classroom has the capacity to enhance their soft skills. The study applied the democratic classroom approach as a teaching method, indicating that this technique may be implemented in Malaysian classrooms. This study observed various attributes of a democratic classroom setting, including egalitarianism, regard for others, the liberty to ask questions, the liberty to express opinions, self-improvement, and thinking skills enhancement. Therefore, we would like to provide some suggestions for future research on the implementation of a democratic classroom in the context of Malaysia.

1. To undertake a comparative analysis of the democratic learning environment approach at private and public universities in Malaysia.
2. To empirically examine the correlation between the presence of a democratic learning environment and students' academic achievement.

8.   Conclusion

This study suggests that instructors should ensure that the learning environment significantly influences students' soft skills. It is essential to know how the democratic classroom affects students' skills. Through a democratic classroom, students enhanced their thinking skills through intellectual discourse, sharing and discussing different ideas, and answering questions together. The traditional teaching or lecturing using one-way communication is no longer deemed relevant in the 21st century. An educator in the 21st century should produce students who are competent in soft skills. Therefore, a democratic classroom is an effective teaching and learning approach to prepare young individuals in the 21st century with appropriate soft skills. It is also suggested that educators should consider implementing this approach in the teaching and learning process.

9.   Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 carried out the fieldwork, prepared the literature review, and overlooked the writeup of the whole article. Author 2 wrote the research methodology. Author 3 carried out the analysis and interpretation of the results. Author 4 wrote the second sub-topic and checked the paper accordingly.

10.   Acknowledgement

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