Authority in the Classroom: How Metacognitive and Reflective Self-assessment Tasks can Improve Wellbeing

Jannek K. Sommer & Elham Kalhor

Background

Teacher authority is pivotal for building an equitable environment and influence that a teacher holds in a classroom allows them to guide, manage, and direct student learning and behavior. Authority can be derived from several sources, including the teacher's role as an expert, their formal position within the educational institution, and the respect they command from students.

The problem

Biases connected to factors outside the teacher's control, such as gender, nationality, age, accent, and physical condition can make it difficult to establish authority. Failure to do so can have negative effects on the learning environment and impact the wellbeing of both students and teaches.

Research question

How can we reduce resistance from predetermined biases among students and increase solidarity towards teachers and other students?

Approach

To reduce resistance from implicit biases on authority, we target how individual characteristics are perceived by applying principles from participatory action research (Lewin, 1946; Leitch & Day, 2000) to develop and employ an interventionist task-regime that incorporates metacognitive tasks (Ghanizadeh, 2017; Di Stefano et al., 2015) and cultural probes (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti, 1999). Participatory action research is a process for facilitating reflective and improved educational practice, commonly conducted to the pursuit of health equity. Findings emerge as action develops, in an ongoing and iterative process of reflection and revision.

Method

From the vantage point of teachers-as-researchers, we develop our task-regime from Elliott's (1991) four-step process of observe-plan-act-evaluate. The purpose is to initiate reflection through action, stimulate learning, and facilitate introspective, self-reflexive kinds of analysis.

1. We begin by a series of tasks in the classroom. Students begin by articulating and observing their own and their peers' perceptions on authority by sharing them on an online board (see picture 1).
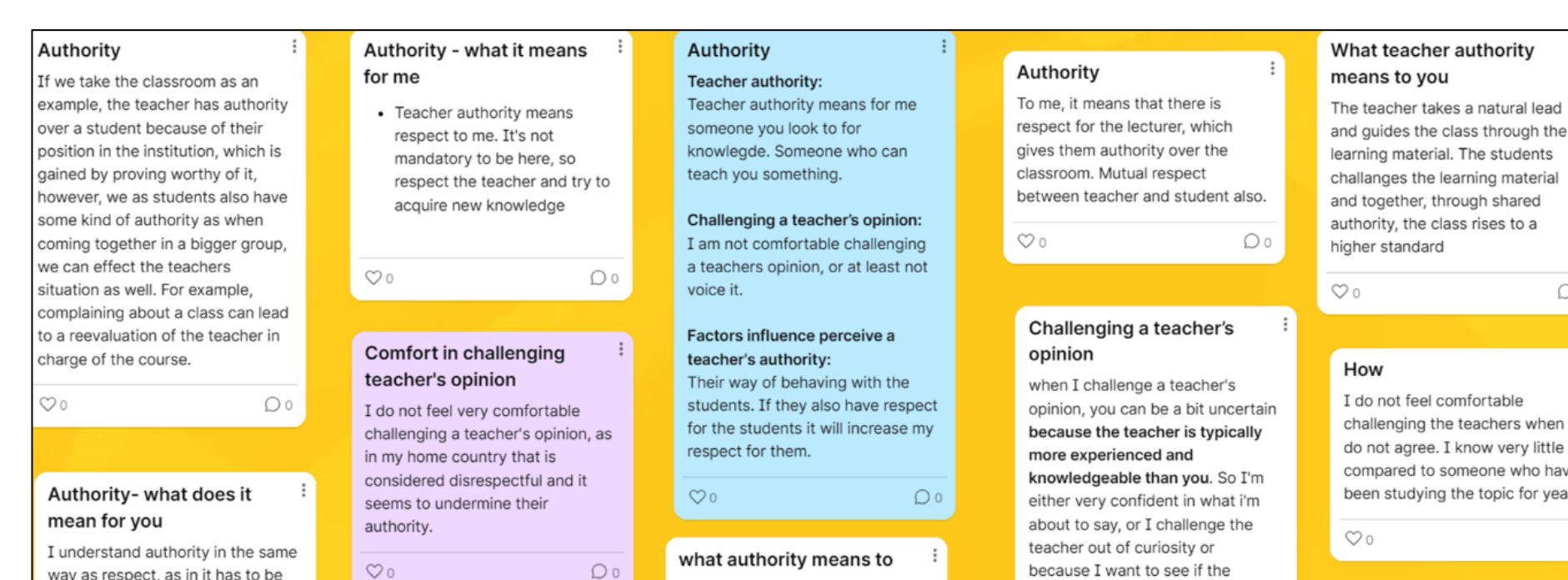
Picture 1. Thoughts on authority shared on online board (excerpt example)

2. Then, we instruct them to reflect on this data by drawing a map of how authority manifests in the classroom. This visual map-task encourages students to move beyond surface-level observations and critically analyze power dynamics, interactions, and structures that may otherwise go unnoticed (see picture 2).
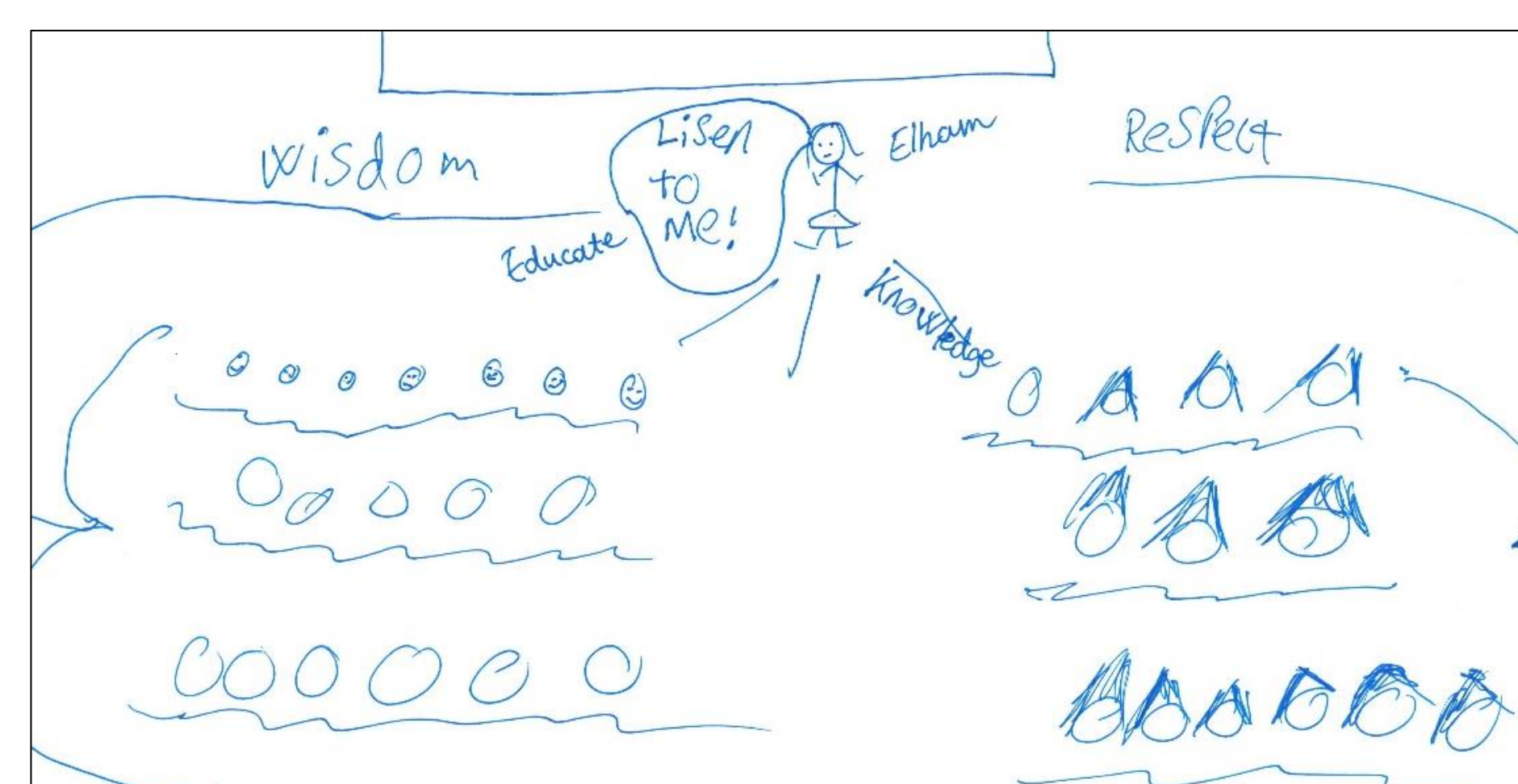
Picture 2. Map drawing (excerpt example)

3. To stimulate further critical analysis, we instruct them to pay attention to aspects of authority for a week and to take notes by doodling, to promote reflection on non-rational processes (Korthagen, 1993) and self-assessment. The free expressive form of doodling is a well-known reflective technique for articulating complex internal states of stress, fear, or tension.

4. Finally, after a week, we ask our students to reflect on the entire process in a second session. Students are asked to revisit comments on the online board and the classroom maps, and to reflect on any shifts in their perceptions.

Results

Structured reflection exercises helped students to recognize their own biases regarding teacher authority, develop greater awareness of external factors (such as age, accent, gender) influencing their perceptions and express the need for more structured guidance in reflective activities. Observations suggest, that while students tend to associate authority with hierarchical power, spatial positioning, and linguistic norms, reflective exercises can disrupt these assumptions, encourage more inclusive perspectives, and pave the way for more equitable classroom dynamics.

Literature

Di Stefano, G., Gino, F., Pisano, G. P., & Staats, B. (2015). Learning by thinking: Overcoming the bias for action through reflection. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard Business School.

Elliott, J. (1991) Action Research for Educational Change. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Gaver, B., Dunne, T., & Pacenti, E. (1999). Design: cultural probes. interactions, 6(1), 21-29.

Ghanizadeh, A. (2017). The interplay between reflective thinking, critical thinking, self-monitoring, and academic achievement in higher education. Higher Education, 74, 101-114.

Korthagen, F. A. (1993). Two modes of reflection. Teaching and Teacher Education, 9(3), 317-326.

Leitch, R., & Day, C. (2000). Action research and reflective practice: Towards a holistic view. Educational action research, 8(1), 179-193.

Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems. Journal of social issues, 2(4), 34-46.