

Epistemic Asymmetry in Adolescent Democratic Deliberation: Teacher Facilitation, Participatory System Design, and Initial Role Reconfiguration Insights from the SAUFEX Interdemocracy Pilot

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Abstract

This conceptual paper examines the rationale and preliminary pilot outcomes of the educational dimension of the Horizon-funded EU project SAUFEX, which seeks to democratize and decentralize decision-making processes related to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). It argues that the inclusion of non-state experts alone is insufficient for democratization, as meaningful responsiveness to citizens and implementability of policies require structured public participation beyond expert advisory mechanisms. Drawing on diverse theories, the paper conceptualizes the conditions under which broad participation can contribute to resilience rather than devolve into illiberal or purely procedural forms of democracy. It contends that educational institutions provide a uniquely suitable environment for approximating these conditions, both logistically and normatively, through synchronized participation, cognitive diversity, and early democratic socialization. The paper presents Interdemocracy as a didactical framework through which adolescents can participate in structured consultation while developing citizen skills. A core challenge in adolescent democratic deliberation is epistemic asymmetry between teachers and students, which risks distorting authentic student participation. In response, Interdemocracy reconceptualizes the teacher's role from epistemic lead to non-epistemic facilitator of procedural integrity, student self-realization, and student self-correction.

Keywords: facilitation, democratic deliberation, participation, epistemic asymmetry, autopoiesis

Introduction

The Horizon-funded EU project SAUFEX has two broad aims. The first is to standardize and expand understanding of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI); the second is to decentralize and democratize decision-making processes and quality assurance related to FIMI. While the first aim is primarily technological, the second incorporates an educational dimension. This conceptual paper examines the rationale underlying the educational component and explores its implications. While educational institutions provide a promising setting for participatory democratic experimentation, they are structurally marked by epistemic asymmetry: teachers occupy institutionally sanctioned positions of epistemic authority, while student contributions are typically treated as epistemically subordinate. This asymmetry creates a tension between educational hierarchy and democratic participation.

The project's focus on education emerged through a gradual and incremental process. It developed from the formal inclusion of non-state experts in decision-making procedures. The mechanism chosen for this inclusion was the so-called "Resilience Council" [1], an institution designed to enable representatives from NGOs and academia to contribute their expertise across all phases of governmental FIMI management - from detection, classification, grading, and reporting to the formulation of responses. The first formal Resilience Council was established to advise the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, and a second is planned as an advisory body to the forthcoming Polish DSC. While the inclusion of non-state experts constitutes a step toward the decentralization of decision-making processes and quality assurance, it remains an initial step only. By focusing exclusively on expert participation, Resilience Councils do not facilitate the inclusion of the general public. As such, they fall short of increasing state institutions' responsiveness to citizens – a key democratic feature [2] - and therefore do not reduce the risk of undemocratic liberalism, a paternalistic tendency within liberal democracies that prioritizes institutions and procedures over citizen well-being [2]. Indeed, limiting participation to experts may instead reinforce a meritocratic bias, whereby the existing hierarchical status quo is viewed as the morally justified endproduct of education and effort [3]. Thus, rather than

broadly advancing decentralization and democratization, stopping at this first step would risk merely confirming existing patterns of exclusion while extending participation to a limited cohort only.

Participation

Setting up participatory processes seems straightforward. Besides establishing how much influence the participants should have, as measured on Arnstein's ladder, the big choice seems to be whether to use a representative method of participation (in which representatives are selected by vote or by lottery) or a referendum-style mechanism. There is a caveat though: participation without a focus on the well-being of all of its participants could turn into a potentially rigged zero-sum game in which the end goal is exerting influence. Decision-making in that scenario, in its ultimate form, risks devolving into a Hobbesian-style contest over influence and democracy risks being seen as a mechanism for allocating influence only. In the case of undemocratic liberalism, democracy as procedural frame becomes an intrinsic good in itself, whereas under illiberal democracy – responsiveness to the in-group citizenry as defined by populist criteria - outweighs the importance of procedures and democratic institutions [2] - it becomes contingent and instrumental. In neither case does the well-being of the whole of the general public constitute the central normative commitment.

Participation Conceptualization

To involve the whole of the general public in fair decision-making means concretely conceptualizing the engagement of not just experts or an in-group as well as positioning citizen well-being as a frame.

Lewandowsky et al. [7] provide a starting-point for conceptualizing citizen engagement. He distinguishes two discourses that are essential in a democracy: "fact-speaking" and "belief-speaking". While "fact-speaking" establishes accuracy as the correspondence between an opinion and evidence gathered in the external world, "belief-speaking" prioritizes accuracy between an opinion and one's inner world. Although "fact-speaking" may excel in getting the facts right and creating a shared understanding of reality, "belief-speaking" is essential for the implementability of policies – without public support evidence-informed decision cannot be effective. This does not mean that the general public should be seen as incapable of fact-speaking; rather the take-away is that both discourse types should be covered by participation mechanisms. Limiting participation to experts and focusing on "fact-speaking" misses out on an essential discourse type thereby risking turning participation into a top-down instrument.

Surowiecki [8] supplies the conditions under which "wisdom" rather than herd folly can be extracted from a crowd. His key insight is that when individual perspectives are aggregated correctly, crowds consistently outperform even knowledgeable individuals across three types of problems: cognition, coordination, and cooperation. For individual perspectives to be aggregated viably, participants need at least some relevant information about the subject. In addition, according to him, there are three preconditions to be met. The first precondition is diversity, understood not in sociological terms, but in conceptual and cognitive terms. Suitable crowds need to encompass a range of perspectives among their participants. The second precondition requires independence in thinking. Participants must make decisions without interference from others: there is to be no communication among individuals, no negotiation, and no compromising during the process of formulating their perspectives. The third precondition emphasizes decentralization. Individuals should draw on their local, specific knowledge and tacit understanding.

In Saufex, citizen well-being is positioned as an intrinsic system quality relevant in the context of information distortions: resilience. Citizen well-being is conceptualized as the experience of autonomy, belonging, and achievement [4]. If these experiences are absent or near absent, a state of dislocation occurs [5]. This condition is so excruciatingly painful that those experiencing it "become susceptible to the lure of pills, gang leaders, extremist religions, or violent political movements – anybody and anything that promises relief" [6]. Resilience in this state is minimal, rendering democracy vulnerable to external and internal destructive pressures.

The underlying image of citizens in this view is autopoietic - autopoiesis is used here in an applied sense to denote that citizens maintain, realize, and correct themselves within a context provided. If the context is destructive and leads them into dislocation, they adapt by self-correction. The same holds good for contexts that enhance their experience of autonomy, belonging, and achievement.

Education

With the conceptualizations in place, the question is: what does this have to do with education? The answer is partially logistical: implementing Surowiecki's second precondition presents significant challenges. In order to prevent consultation between participants when presenting their perspectives, a setting must be created in which a crowd of citizens receives a question simultaneously and responds individually, without an opportunity for discussion or coordination. In order to approximate Surowiecki's preconditions, including the second one, a carefully designed process is needed.

Currently in project Saufex, it is not clear yet how to translate the preconditions into a setting suitable for the whole of the general public. However, for at least one group a potentially compatible setting does exist: adolescents within the educational system. Relative to many other administratively available cohorts, educational settings provide substantial cognitive diversity. They also offer an obvious frame for introducing relevant subject information. And, importantly, its central planning allows for simultaneously presenting a question to a cohort. In addition to logistical feasibility, the educational setting also provides a normative advantage: by providing a constructive context by enabling young citizens to experience structured democratic engagement, it allows democratic participation skills to be developed early. Yet the very institutional structure that makes schools logistically suitable for synchronized participation also introduces a complication: educational settings are organized around entrenched epistemic asymmetries between teachers and students, requiring procedural safeguards if authentic student expression is to be preserved.

Interdemocracy

Within project Saufex a promising didactical intervention was identified: Interdemocracy. Interdemocracy is an established didactical format and method. The format was recommended by the European Commission in its original *Guidelines for teachers and educators on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training* (2022). The implementation of the format and method was endorsed by the European Commission in the *Final report* of the Commission expert group on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training. Prominent representatives across diverse professional communities, including policy-makers, academics, and practitioners, positively reviewed a book on Interdemocracy's format and method and its theoretical foundations [9], while Interdemocracy pilots were positively vetted by representatives of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Pomeranian Center for Teacher Education.

Interdemocracy is seen as promising since it enables the distillation of wisdom from groups within a participatory process as well as individual autopoiesis – autonomous self-realization and self-correction. It stipulates a context in which all individuals autonomously formulate their perspectives on one central question simultaneously in parallel, without interaction.

The Interdemocracy Participation Process

The Interdemocracy participation process is designed to operationalize large-scale citizen input while preserving the conditions necessary for independent judgment and meaningful aggregation of perspectives. The method structures participation across multiple classrooms in parallel in several stages that combine autonomous individual input, collective reflection, and institutional response.

The process starts with a short, evidence-informed introduction by the teacher in the classroom followed up by a central question that is directed to students. Each student then formulates an individual response. The responses are submitted directly to a central server, ensuring that contributions are recorded simultaneously and independently. Once collected, the responses are analyzed transparently through an artificial intelligence system operating under human supervision. The system clusters similar responses and identifies recurring themes in the students' perspectives. This clustering does not replace human judgment but assists in organizing large volumes of input in a transparent and manageable way. To avoid potential bias multiple clustering procedures are followed including two-step digital content forking.

On the basis of the clustered responses, a group of older students, referred to as the Youth Resilience Council, develops a set of preliminary recommendations. The Council performs bounded deliberation constrained by aggregated student input and subject to iterative student ratification; it operates as a translating layer that structures the aggregated input into policy-relevant recommendations. It reviews the aggregated perspectives of the participating students and formulates proposals that reflect the concerns, arguments, and values expressed in the responses. The recommendations are then returned

to the participating students for evaluation. These students, in turn, indicate whether they agree or disagree with the proposed recommendations and provide a short explanation for their position. These reflections are submitted to the central server. The second round of student input is subsequently analyzed using the same AI-supported clustering process under human supervision. The resulting analysis allows the Youth Resilience Council to assess how the broader group of students perceives the proposed recommendations and whether important concerns or perspectives have been overlooked. Based on this feedback, the council considers whether revisions are necessary and, if required, adjusts the recommendations accordingly. After this deliberative step, the council formulates the final set of recommendations. The final recommendations are then transmitted to relevant public institutions, which are invited to respond to them. The institutional responses are communicated back to the participating students, closing the feedback loop and ensuring that participants are informed about how their contributions have been received and what potential impact they have had.

Through this structured process, Interdemocracy seeks to combine independent individual input, large-scale aggregation of perspectives, youth deliberation, and institutional accountability within a single participatory framework. Adolescents are not taken as proxies for the general public; they only give voice to their own age cohort. Therefore, this set-up presents not more than a first step in engaging all citizens.

The Interdemocracy Autopoiesis Process

Alongside the participation mechanism, Interdemocracy incorporates a structured process designed to regulate how communication takes place during the classroom participation stages. The aim of this process is to create conditions in which participants can articulate their views independently while experiencing attentive listening and exposure to multiple perspectives. Within the framework, the teacher assumes a strictly procedural role as facilitator. The teacher does not evaluate the content of students' contributions or intervene in the substance of the perspectives uttered. Instead, their responsibility is limited to ensuring that the communication directives governing the process are correctly implemented and followed.

Several communication directives structure the process. First, students are required to formulate their perspectives using first-person statements. Each participant expresses their view from their own standpoint rather than speaking on behalf of others or in abstract generalizations. This requirement encourages personal responsibility for one's perspective and reduces the tendency to frame arguments in adversarial or groupish terms. Second, interaction among students is prohibited during the formulation of individual perspectives. Participants develop their responses independently, without discussion, negotiation, or coordination with others. This rule preserves independence in thinking and prevents the convergence of viewpoints through peer influence thus fulfilling Surowiecki's second precondition of independent judgment in raw input collection. Third, students formulate their perspectives in three successive steps. They first write their response on paper, then submit it in digital form, and finally read their statement aloud while recording it as an audio contribution. This sequence encourages reflection during formulation and personal responsibility when presenting perspectives publicly. Fourth, each spoken contribution must conclude with the phrase "thank you." This small procedural element functions as a symbolic closure of the statement and reinforces a respectful communication environment. Fifth, the order of read-out student contributions is determined randomly. Randomization prevents the emergence of implicit hierarchies in speaking order and ensures that no participant is structurally advantaged or disadvantaged in presenting their perspective. Sixth, responses to the perspectives of others are not permitted during this phase of the process. Students are expected to listen without commenting, challenging, or endorsing the statements of their peers. In line with this rule, the teacher maintains a neutral stance and refrains from evaluative reactions. Finally, all students are invited to participate in each activity under identical conditions. No participant is excluded from the process, and no individual receives preferential treatment. The procedural framework therefore ensures equal access to participation.

Together, these communication directives establish a stable and psychologically safe launchpad for participation. They encourage students to articulate their views more authentically, while also allowing them to experience that others listen with sustained attention. At the same time, participants are exposed to a range of different perspectives, fostering an experiential awareness of plural viewpoints within the group.

Interdemocracy and Student Autopoiesis

The independent articulation of their thoughts by students and the experience of being listened to by others without judgment in the Interdemocracy setting is to foster student self-realization. The exposure of students to plural perspectives formulated by their fellow-students is to foster student self-correction. A key challenge to student autopoiesis is the traditional epistemic asymmetry between teachers and students that hierarchically enforces student correction, rather than stimulates self-correction. This is a major reason why in Interdemocracy teachers assume a different role.

Teachers as Facilitators

Within Interdemocracy teachers fulfill the role of facilitators. This role is strikingly different from their regular role as teachers. As teachers, their basic task is to transfer curriculum-defined knowledge and skills to students; they function as subject-bound epistemic leads with a mission. Their focus is predominantly on “fact-speaking”; they impose the educational system as the default context for autopoiesis. This leads to benevolent interventions, aimed at nudging students towards a predefined subject-specific direction within the boundaries of the curriculum, while the teacher’s inherent mission adds a layer of emotional care. At a cognitive level, this dynamic is underpinned by naïve realism: the implicit assumption that one’s own perceptions and interpretations correspond directly to objective reality, while those of others are comparatively subjective or distorted. In the educational context, this cognitive tendency interacts with role-based authority to help produce an epistemic hierarchy in which teacher-speaking is tacitly construed as superior “fact-speaking,” while student-speaking is more readily classified as inferior “fact-speaking” or mere “belief-speaking.” Because teachers experience their own judgments as objective rather than interpretive, this classificatory process typically remains invisible to them. Consequently, interventions in student expression appear not as exercises of epistemic power, but as necessary and morally justified corrections. Naïve realism thus renders influence epistemically invisible to the influencer while making restraint feel like professional negligence.

The role of facilitator is based on very different requirements. The facilitator is to observe in an epistemically neutral fashion, not intervene benevolently. Their primary responsibility is to safeguard the procedural integrity of the process, ensuring that students can express their perspectives with minimal external barriers or constraints. The epistemic foundation is content-agnostic, not domain specific, whereas the boundaries are legal rather than the curriculum. Lastly, the teacher’s mission is not to be translated into emotional care but into ethical care – as responsibility, not guardianship.

Teachers as Facilitators - Experiences

Between November 2025 and March 2026, a small-scale Interdemocracy pilot was conducted in ten primary schools in the Pomeranian Voivodship (Poland) within the framework of the Saufex project. Fourteen teachers conducted four ninety-minute sessions in sixteen classes. The pilot was co-organized with the Pomeranian Center for Teacher Education and was supported by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was anticipated that teachers would face significant challenges in fulfilling the facilitator role due to the profound shift in attitude it entails.

The pilot results did not confirm this expectation. Teachers quantitatively reported increasing comfort with the facilitator role across sessions. After sessions two, three, and four, teachers indicated on a Likert-5 scale how much they agreed with the following statement: *Compared to the previous session, I felt more comfortable in the role of facilitator*. The average results were positive. The average score was 4.17 after session 2; 3.8 after session 3; and 3.56 after session 4.

The quantitative results indicate that teachers continued to report increasing ease in facilitation across sessions, although the magnitude of perceived improvement diminished over time. Qualitative data offers insight into teachers’ internal journey, suggesting that what appears as ease in practice may in fact reflect a deeper transformation in professional identity. Facilitators also reported noticeable shifts in their own professional experience during the sessions.

Many teachers described a sense of becoming “unburdened” during facilitation. Once they accepted that they were not expected to provide the correct answers or to resolve every situation, they were able to concentrate fully on maintaining the process itself. They reported feeling more at ease as they were no longer positioned as controllers of classroom outcomes. This change reduced their performance anxiety and allowed them to adopt a more observational role. Subsequently, teachers became more aware of underlying classroom dynamics. By stepping slightly aside from their usual authoritative role, they were able to observe patterns of peer influence, subtle social pressures, and individual strengths

of students who typically remain quiet in conventional lessons. Many facilitators also reported that guiding the process helped them further develop soft competencies, including mindfulness, conflict moderation, and emotional self-regulation.

At the same time, the shift in role occasionally proved challenging. In situations in which student engagement declined or in which participants expressed resistance, the facilitator's task was not to intervene or push the discussion toward a particular outcome but simply to maintain the communicative framework - ensuring time boundaries, procedural fairness, and a safe environment. Several teachers indicated that "guarding the frame" rather than attempting to produce immediate results required a different form of professional patience, and for many this represented the most demanding aspect of the transition into the facilitator role.

Other Types of Facilitation

While Interdemocracy facilitation in the classroom involves facilitating students to formulate their perspectives and listen to other students' perspectives without judgment or reaction, facilitation in the Youth Resilience Council concerns in addition what Bauman calls "citizen skills": "the skills of interaction with others – of conducting a dialogue, of negotiation, of gaining mutual understanding and of managing or resolving conflict". [10] This shifts the focus of facilitation even further towards an ethical care stance. [11; 12]

Within the Saufex project, deliberations are ongoing on how to apply facilitation to curriculum subjects that lean heavily on a teacher transfer of knowledge and skills. A preliminary option could be to devise a deterministic, policy-constrained AI system, compliant to all EU and national regulations, that dynamically generates exercises and provides first-line formative assessments. Teacher facilitation would then consist of providing second-line formative assessment support, helping students interpret the feedback, clarifying procedural misunderstandings, supporting metacognition and self-correction, and ensuring accessibility and legal and ethical compliance.

Conclusion

Within SAUFEX, the educational dimension of democratizing FIMI governance emerges not as an auxiliary component but as a practical and normative necessity. Educational settings provide an institutional environment suited for approximating the procedural conditions required for structured large-scale citizen participation while simultaneously cultivating some of the democratic competencies needed for future public engagement. Through Interdemocracy, schools appear capable of functioning not merely as sites of knowledge and skills transfer, but as safe environments in which adolescents practice independent thought and expression, experience plural perspectives, and participate in structured processes of collective voice formation. As such, education could function both as a mechanism for implementing participatory resilience-building and as a formative space for democratic socialization.

This potential reorientation carries significant implications for the professional role of teachers. Within the SAUFEX framework, facilitation is conceptualized not as a minor pedagogical adjustment but as a distinct professional stance requiring the temporary suspension of conventional epistemic authority in favor of procedural neutrality, ethical care, and frame-guarding. Early pilot findings suggest that teachers seem capable of adopting the role of facilitator and may experience it as professionally transformative although challenging. If facilitation is further extended into additional educational and curricular contexts, the teacher's role may increasingly evolve from knowledge and skills transmitter toward facilitator of student self-realization, self-correction, and democratic participation. Possibly, the educational strand of project SAUFEX could point not only toward new participatory mechanisms, but toward a broader reconceptualization of education and teacher professionalism in democratic societies.

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