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The Use of Discussion Protocols in Social Studies

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Pedagogy, For What Ends?

Amid all the fuss and feathers, there is substance, there is reality, in social studies...it will be said that the growth of social studies places on teachers an impossible burden, it compels them to deal with controversial questions...They cannot master their subject reasonably well and settle back to a ripe old age early in life. The subject matter of their instruction is infinitely difficult and it is continually changing. If American democracy is to fulfill its high mission, those who train its youth must be among the wisest, most fearless, and most highly trained men and women this broad land can furnish. (Beard, 1929, p. 369)

When it comes to public school curricula in the United States, social studies is the most encompassing and inclusive of all subjects (Ross, 2014). It is in social studies that students are educated for participation in a pluralist democracy. It is in our subject matter courses that students should be given opportunities to grapple with decision-making, reaching consensus, participation in groups, and controversy in preparation for life in and outside of school. Given such an important task, social studies educators must think how their pedagogy (i.e., what they *do* in the classroom) is tied to the goals of social studies as a school discipline. What are we doing in the classroom that prepares students for active participation in civic life? Or as Parker (2010) framed this, "How should we think about the boundary between content and pedagogy?" (p. 11). As the NCSS (2008) statement on "Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies" makes clear, our classes should be "meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active" (para. 9-13). Statements from NCSS notwithstanding, this does not describe the pedagogy that most students in social studies experience. Scholars have long lamented the quality of instruction found in schools across the US. The stereotype of lower-order pedagogies, drill and kill teaching, and rote exercises across disciplines is supported by an ample body of evidence (Goodlad, 1984; Swift & Gooding, 1983). And, in social studies, the picture isn't any better (Barton & Levstik, 2003; Cuban, 1991; Knowles, & Theobald, 2013; Levstik, 2008; Ross, 2000). Given that our discipline is oriented towards helping students understand the world and their place in it, traditional pedagogy (i.e., lecture, recitation, rote memorization), in and of itself, does not meet the demands of our profession. In what follows, we first argue that *discussion* in social studies, as an intentional and planned pedagogical move, is integral to democratic citizenship education, and second, that discussion pedagogy can be strengthened through the use of structured protocols.

Why Discussion in Social Studies?

In this section we will examine three areas of social studies research and practice: 1) the NCSS statement "A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy" (2008), 2) the NCSS *College, Career, and Civic Life: C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (C3) (2013), and 3) the recent push for disciplinary thinking in the social science disciplines (see Schmidt, 2011; VanSledright, 2004; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), that support the implementation of discussion pedagogy in social studies. First, the NCSS Statement on Powerful Social Studies (2008) and the NCSS College, Career, and Civic Life Framework (C3) (2013) can be thought of as starting points for teachers and how they can conceptualize integrating discussion pedagogy into their teaching. Social studies that is "meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active" (NCSS, 2008, para. 9-13) must include classroom methods that allow students to explore the complexity of the social sciences *and* the concept or participatory democracy. In examining how social studies should be "value-based," NCSS explicitly supports discussion pedagogy:

> Through discussions, debates, the use of authentic documents, simulations, research, and other occasions for critical thinking and decision-making, students learn to apply value-based reasoning when addressing problems and issues.

> Students engage in experiences that develop fair-mindedness, and encourage recognition and serious consideration of opposing points of view, respect for well-supported positions, sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences, and a commitment to individual and social responsibility. (para. 8)

In addition to the stance that NCSS has taken relative to discussion in social studies, research suggests that discussion of controversial issues is a significant predictor of political knowledge, values, and engagement (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001). And, last but not least, students, who report that social studies is their least favorite subject (Loewen, 2007), enjoy courses that use discussion to learn and think about content (Hess & Posselt, 2002).

Of the four dimensions of the *C3 Framework* (2013) one can see how discussion of social studies concepts and phenomena can be infused into each of these areas. Specifically, Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries (pp. 23-27) and Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action (pp. 59-63) are ideal places to infuse discussion into enacted social studies pedagogy. At the heart of the *C3 Framework* and at the heart of effective classroom discussion is the notion of inquiry, of asking *real* questions that matter, and allowing students to actually talk about these issues. As Selwyn (2014) notes,

> ...inquiry in the "real world" involves asking questions that the researcher truly wants to or needs to explore....Inquiry involves an increasingly valuable set of skills and strategies to bring to students; if we don't help them learn how to question, to research, to evaluate, to communicate, to act, where will they learn and practice those skills? (p. 268)

Finally, the recent trend towards disciplinary thinking in social studies also lends itself to discussion-based teaching. Regardless of the discipline, a hallmark of these subjects is their open-ended nature. In history, geography, government, economics, and the behavioral sciences experts in these fields go about their work largely by asking questions and attempting to solve problems—not providing ready-made answers to contrived questions that have a right or wrong answer. In this way, discussing fundamental controversies and issues within social science disciplines opens pathways for students to develop "the skills, understandings, and processes of disciplinary experts" (Fallace, 2010, p. 24). These skills, although not the raison d'être for all social studies teachers, do provide students with critical thinking skills needed for full participation in our pluralist democracy. Students who have these skills "are informed, educated, thoughtful, critical readers, who appreciate investigative enterprises, know good arguments when they hear them, and who engage their world with a host of strategies for understanding it" (VanSledright, 2004, p. 232). Discussion pedagogy, as a part of social studies instruction, takes seriously the job of education towards democratic dispositions, a "willingness and ability to interact with others on matters of public concern" (Larson & Keiper, 2011, p. 210). In short, discussion is an integral part of democratic education (Hess, 2009; Parker, 1997).

What Does the Research Say?

In looking at the research in this area, Hess' (2004) work on discussion pedagogy in social studies is a good starting point. Her work reveals that discussions in social studies classrooms are not an organic development that occurs without prior planning and thought. In fact, the opposite is true. Teachers who attempt discussions in social studies are stymied by several problems: the tendency of teachers to talk too much, asking inauthentic questions, lack of focus and depth in student contributions, and unequal participation of students (Hess, 2004). In addition, Chandler (2013) maintains that successful classroom discussions require careful planning in at least three areas: having an explicit structure (or rules) for governing the discussion, choosing exciting and thought-provoking content, and having students develop or create a "product" (pp. 40-43). In what follows, we focus on Chandler's (2013) first criteria—the explicit structure (see also Parker, 2001; Passe & Evans, 2007) of a discussion—through the use of protocols in social studies. Protocols can best be thought of as the rules or expectations of the discussion as it unfolds (Chandler, 2011; Wentworth, n.d.). This allows for a common understanding of what constitutes "formal" discussion for your students (SSEC, 2011, p. 349), and helps to delineate your classroom method from a "bull session" where "participants vent their opinions with passion but exhibit little purpose and no reflection" (Roby, 1998, p. 65).

Using Protocols to Strengthen Social Studies Discussions

Given the inclusive nature (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1978) of social studies, teachers are continually challenged by the material they must explore with their students. This raises questions about how to engage students in rich discussions in history and the social sciences. Protocols are designed to support meaningful discussion, to elicit differing opinions from students and

ultimately to create equity within classrooms (McDonald, et al., 2012). Oftentimes, not all students feel comfortable contributing in the classroom, and may miss the opportunity to engage with classmates when communicating about sensitive or controversial topics. While protocols can be used with various delivery methods, it is important to consider how each protocol may be adapted for a specific environment (Ehrlich, Ergulec, Zydney, & Angelone, 2013). Lastly, discussion protocols help to ensure that conditions for effective, meaningful, and inclusive discussions are present. These conditions are:

1. a general disposition that students are willing to listen, consider, and be responsive to others' comments,
2. a stance of contributing from a unique standpoint, sharing personal perspectives and current understandings of the issue at hand, and
3. the goal of advancing the group's knowledge and understanding of the topic at hand (not to win an argument or "prove a point"). (Larson & Keiper, 2011, p. 211; see also Bridges, 1987)

Implementing Protocols in Social Studies Classroom

Protocols are important because they provide a *necessary* structure for discussions to take place in your classroom. We provide three sample protocols in Table 1. *Three Sample Protocols to Foster Classroom Discussion* in the hope that they will be used as guides or frameworks to direct classroom discussion efforts. In this way, these protocols can be thought of as pedagogical frameworks that can be modified to fit content and school environment (Cornbleth, 2002). We hold that using protocols as guiding frameworks to organize discussion is superior to what often passes as "discussion" in social studies. It is our hope that the reader will view the idea of protocols in general (and these examples specifically) as fluid constructs that can be used throughout one's practice. In fact, this is one of the strengths of protocols–they allow for the "complexity and idiosyncrasy of the everyday classroom" (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 45), while allowing students in social studies the space and freedom to have a "social" social studies experience.

Table 1. *Three Sample Protocols to Foster Classroom Discussion***:**

A. Four A's Protocol (Adapted from Gray, 2005)
Purpose: This protocol helps students to deepen their understanding of a text and works especially well when participants need to approach the text from different perspectives. This protocol engages students in reading while helping to develop critical-thinking skills and is useful when working with primary sources.
(12 minutes) *Introduction:* The group silently reads the text. During this time, group members should be highlighting and documenting notes with answers to the following four questions (you can also add your own "A's")   • What did you *Already Know* (*Affirming*) in/from the text?

- What do you *Agree* with?
- What, in the text, do you want to *Argue* with?
- What parts of the text do you want to *Analyze* further?

(12 minutes) *Reactions*: In groups, have each person identify one statement/idea/information in the text that they "Already Knew," citing where necessary. Provide enough time to explore each.

(36 minutes) *Remaining A's*: Either continue in group discussions or facilitate a conversation in which the class as a whole talks about each of the three remaining "A"s, reviewing each one at a time. Provide enough time to explore each.

(5 minutes) *Conclusion*: When concluding the activity, provide an opportunity for an open discussion focused around a question such as: What do these documents tell us about what happened in this event?

(5 minutes) *Debrief*: Debrief the experience of analyzing the text by responding to example debriefing questions such as:

What else would I like to find out?
What questions do I now need to ask?

B. Six Thinking Hats (Adapted from Burdick, 2011)

Purpose: This is a simple and effective parallel-thinking process that helps students to be more focused and involved. The purpose of this protocol is to help students look at decisions from a multiple perspectives in history, current events, or government/civics.

Roles:
1. *Neutrality (White)*: Asks Questions. With the information provided, what are the facts?
2. *Feeling (Red)*: React with gut instinct and statements based in emotional feeling (absent of any justification).
3. *Negative judgment (Gray)*: Looks for inaccuracies in the discussion by applying logic and pointing to barriers.
4. *Positive Judgment (Yellow)*: Is in pursuit of harmony by using logic to highlight benefits.
5. *Creative thinking (Green)*: Generates conversation by prompting group with statements of provocation and investigation.
6. *The Big Picture (Blue)*: Keeps the group on task and establishes objectives (This is typically the role of the facilitator).

(1-2 minutes for each student) Organize students into groups of five, one person for each color. The sixth color should be assigned to the facilitator. Students are each assigned a card with the assigned color, and then take on the role represented by the color during the discussion.

During each participant's time, participants speak from the role they have assumed, and only from that perspective, discussing the topic highlighted for that discussion.

It is also useful to use prompts/material for discussion may include, but not limited, images or quotes of significance to lesson theme such as controversial images, articles, quotes, or media.

C. Provocative Prompts (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2007; McDonald et al., 2012)

Purpose: This protocol helps promote a course culture that considers disagreement as productive for learning and a natural part of democratic life. This protocol offers an opportunity to facilitate a discussion around controversial topics while giving students the opportunity to examine a topic from various points of view--a necessary skill in a participatory democracy.

Preparation: Instructor chooses quotations (provocative prompts) in advance. Copies of the chosen quotes with sources are prepared. Each group is given the different quotes, and they are shared with the groups within the class.

Quotes Distributed: The facilitator distributes quotes randomly; each written on a piece of paper.

(3 – 5 minutes for each student) *First Quote Chosen (Agreement):* Each group member chooses one quotation and shares one by one going around in a circle why he or she chose it.

(3 – 5 minutes for each student) *Second Quotation Chosen (Disagreement):* Each group member chooses a second quotation that provokes him or her to think differently about the topic at hand and writes a brief account of why this impacted his or her thinking.

(3 – 5 minutes for each student) *Partners are Created:* Each student shares his or her thinking around the quotation. After the students have shared their thinking, the rest of the group reflects back on what was shared. Each group member reads his or her quotation and responds in that moment.

Optional: Facilitator posts quotations on chart paper around the room. Students use Post-It notes to post ideas and thoughts surrounding the quotations with questions and comments where necessary.

Note: Three Sample Protocols are adapted from *Table 1. Protocols Adapted from Face-to-Face to Online* (Ehrlich et al., 2013).

Conclusion

A proper curriculum for democracy requires both the study and the <u>practice</u> *of democracy* (Parker, 2005, p.

351). [emphasis added]

Discussion protocols can help teachers overcome the issues that were noted by Hess (2004) earlier in this article, as well as serve as explicit structures for discussions. Structured protocols can foster a trusting environment and encourage critical thinking and different perspectives in the classroom (McDonald, Zydney, Dichter, & McDonald, 2012). Protocols for discussion serve to improve not only students' experiences in classroom discussions, but also ultimately improve the depth of understanding and reflection that occurs within these conversations. It is then that teachers and students can move from reading and viewing content to connecting and understanding, transforming learning about their place in our democracy. When we survey the apathy of young people towards politics in the US (Pew Research Center, 2014), we must wonder if the social studies education that they received has contributed to these feelings. It does seem odd that the one subject area designed to prepare students for political participation does not, through the traditional methods that teachers use, allow students to practice the skills that are required for thoughtful and deliberative participation in our democracy. If we want our students to discuss, debate, and consider alternatives in the political realm as members of our democracy, shouldn't we allow them the space to practice these skills in social studies classrooms? The use of protocols, as a pedagogical tool, allows teachers to foster conditions in which students can practice the skills required for active citizenship.

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Additional Resources for Teachers

(Article) http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0360131515000330

(Article) http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11423-013-9288-3

(Protocol repository) http://www.nsrfharmony.org/free-resources/protocols/a-z

(Pedagogical repository: setting discussion expectations)
https://topr.online.ucf.edu/index.php/Setting_Discussion_Expectations

(Protocols for Online Discussions list)
http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/CUOnline/FacultySupport/Handbook/Documents/DiscussionProtocols.pdf

(Small Group Discussion Protocols list) http://pharmacy.unc.edu/files/2015/06/Appendix-B-Discussion-Protocols.pdf

(Article and list: Protocols for Culturally Responsive Learning)
http://notebook.lausd.net/pls/ptl/docs/PAGE/CA_LAUSD/LAUSDNET/ABOUT_US/INITIATIVES/AEMP/CAG_HOME/CRRE_CLEARINGHOUSE/PROTOCOLS.PDF