Building Civil Discourse in Social Studies Through Historical Inquiry Deliberation (HID)

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Social studies curriculum and instructional practices have garnered intense public scrutiny as of late and have become a battleground for ideological powerplays that threaten the discipline’s foundations of skill and critical thought development. Teachers must continue to help students learn effective skills for engaging in civil discourse and to understand that individuals who differ on an issue can, and should, still work together in a productive manner. This article calls for an increased emphasis on social studies in education and highlights an effective strategy for developing civil discourse skills through what I call Historical Inquiry Deliberation (HID). A sample lesson for engaging students in this process, entitled “Historical Inquiry Deliberation: The New Republic,” can be found in the Classroom-based Activities section of this issue of the journal.

**Social Studies to Promote Engaged Citizens – Even in a Hyper-polarized Climate**

History, geography, political science, and economics encompass much more than memorizing definitions and dates. Each course of study relies on the analysis of data and information to draw conclusions; practices that develop skills students need to be active and civically engaged members of their communities. John Dewey wrote in 1909, “The child is to be not only a voter and a subject of law; he is also to be a member of a family, himself in turn responsible, in all probability, for rearing and training of future children, thereby maintaining the continuity of society” (Dewey, 1909, p. 9). Here, Dewey reiterates American founding principles related to implementing public schooling for the maintenance of an educated citizenry. Social studies became, and continues to be accepted as, a vehicle for informing and training students about the virtues and responsibilities they carry as members of a democratic republic. Some issues of the twentieth century, such as the Red Scare and challenges to the Civil Rights Movement, unfortunately led to what Ronald Evans calls the ‘Social Studies Wars’ over who had
authority over how and what was taught in social studies (Evans, 2004, p. 96). It appears we are at yet another crossroads in protecting good social studies instruction and skill development from an ideological tug of war.

Society’s current intense polarization and growing rigidity of thought is making it more difficult to fulfill the dynamic role of citizenship in the United States. Civic engagement in our democratic republic relies on active participation from citizens representing all perspectives. With the growing isolation of ideas through media “filter bubbles” or “echo chambers,” the possibility of making community, state, or national policy based on consensus becomes increasingly less likely. Rarely do elected officials who disagree on basic political ideology achieve bipartisan success to resolve issues. This claim is supported by the Pew Research Center’s 2022 analysis of partisan polarization. According to their study, “gaps between the least conservative Republicans and least liberal Democrats in both the House and Senate have widened – making it ever less likely that there’s any common ground to find” (Desilver, 2022).

Republicans tend to be more conservative, and Democrats tend to be more liberal than ever before, which results in fewer centrists who regularly work across the aisle. This type of strict dogma limits opportunities for unified problem-solving by citizens holding differing viewpoints. As a result, students have limited exposure to policymakers of different parties working together productively. Instead, social media and news media feeds are dominated by soundbites and posts that aggressively attack those individuals who hold opposing viewpoints. Unfortunately, we find that many students do not consider the purposeful questioning of opposing ideas to obtain clarity and understanding as an effective method of problem solving.
Social studies is currently on the frontline of curricular and instructional challenges by contending forces vying for ideological power. Ironically, social studies will become the training ground instead of the battleground to resolve these problems and to develop future civic leaders, who can effectively find solutions to community and national issues in a way that values a plurality of thoughts, ideas, and perspectives. “The extent to which there are multiple and competing perspectives voiced about what ‘we’ the people should do to address a problem facing the community is not a flaw of democracy, but a marker of how democratic a community is in practice” (Hess, 2009, p. 78). It is important that students learn to embrace contending opinions as they are freely expressed on an issue of community or national importance. While these issues are not easy to resolve, it is important for leaders at all levels of government to understand the value of learning from a wide range of perspectives and are skilled problem solvers.

An Effective Strategy for Promoting Civil Discourse in Social Studies Classes

The current social and political climate does not often provide action models of effective civil discourse. Joe Schmidt and Nichelle Pinkney’s 2022 book, Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities, highlights the impact of fewer adults being involved in community organizations and clubs where interaction among large groups of people with varying political backgrounds and beliefs was commonplace in previous generations. The authors further claim, “Calls for schools to prepare students to be civically active have grown more urgent in recent decades because schools have increasingly become one of the few shared spaces left in our society” (Schmidt & Pinkney, 2022, p. 10). Therefore, as social studies educators, we must be deliberate in our efforts to help students practice these skills in classroom settings.
We must also create situations for students to experience how they can develop their own individual opinions on a topic through comprehensive study, research, and personal experience. Students should not come away from our classes thinking that having their own opinion on a topic or issue is somehow bad or destructive. In addition to forming individual thoughts, students should experience how truly listening and considering opposing opinions may lead them to either a greater understanding of where common ground might exist or to a refinement of their original thoughts by considering the greater nuances of a problem.

One effective strategy to promote enhanced problem-solving skills is known as “Structured Academic Controversy,” which was introduced in the early 1990s by brothers David Johnson and Roger Johnson of the University of Minnesota. Their research focuses on cooperative learning, and they introduced this scaffolded format to help students wrestle with opposing viewpoints in a way that fosters knowledge growth. Johnson and Johnson emphasize throughout their work the profound idea that there is a difference between controversy and competition. “Within a cooperative context conflicts tend to be defined as problems to be jointly solved, while within a competitive context conflicts tend to be defined as ‘win-lose’ situations” (Johnson & Johnson, 1979, p. 59). Unfortunately, society today seems to have become mired in competition rather than looking at issues or questions as controversies to be jointly resolved.

The original format for Johnson and Johnson’s Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) requires student pairs to investigate one side of an issue or problem within a small group and then, in a later step of the procedure, reverse positions to develop points in support of the opposite side from which they were first assigned. This format requires students to truly consider ideas from multiple perspectives. In the final step, group members drop any assigned
perspective and create “a synthesis that is students’ best reasoned judgement on the issue” (Johnson et al., 1996, p. iv). Essentially, student groups weigh the evidence presented in the earlier steps to reach an agreed upon solution to the issue. Competition has been removed from the deliberation process and students are participating in a discussion that truly weighs evidence in a collaborative and productive manner. Activities such as SAC help students develop and practice skills in a structured environment. They help students better navigate disagreement and become effective leaders as society must deal with the messy and competitive social issues of today.

Many variations and styles for implementing Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) with students of all ages have been developed over the previous three decades. All have in common the basic tenets of deliberation and consideration of multiple perspectives to arrive at an agreed upon solution to a problem. Dr. Diana Hess, Dean of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Dr. Paula McAvoy, Assistant Professor of Social Studies at North Carolina State University have expounded on the basic concept of SAC and produced engaging approaches to infuse productive discussion techniques in social studies classrooms. They link discussion as a key to American democracy and have written numerous articles and books connecting the subject of classroom discussion to promoting civic engagement among students. A good introduction to Hess and McAvoy’s work can be reviewed in the article and videos linked here from Educator Innovator’s online article entitled “Talking Across Political Differences.” https://educatorinnovator.org/talking-across-political-differences/

How Can SAC Strategies Be Used With Students Beyond Deliberation of Current Issues
As a high school history teacher, I wanted to utilize the basic format of Structured Academic Controversy with historical topics and primary sources. It can be done! I call this procedure Historical Inquiry Deliberation (HID). The lesson entitled “Historical Inquiry Deliberation: The New Republic,” found in the Classroom-based Activities section of this issue of the journal, combines a Structured Academic Controversy approach with Document Based Question processes to promote productive discussion and inquiry in one lesson. In a HID activity, students use primary sources from various perspectives of a historical issue to more deeply analyze decisions made in the past through a scaffolded group discussion.

Adapting the Structured Academic Controversy strategy for historical inquiry has been effective in my own classroom. Some of my students who are the most reluctant to speak in front of the entire class shine in this type of activity. They are more comfortable in the small group setting and the deliberation is scaffolded in such a way that they feel safe in building talking points from the evidence. Because the teacher assigns the original roles to each group pair, some students feel less reluctant to participate.

**Summary of Findings and Implications for Classroom Practice**

As social studies educators, we want our students to become engaged in their communities and become the problem solvers of the future. Utilizing the Structured Academic Controversy approach builds student confidence, discussion skills, and understanding of the power multiple perspectives can bring to solving a problem. Adapting this technique for historical content can allow for a collaborative twist to the widely utilized Document Based Question assignment.
References


Appendix

The studies and research selected for inclusion in this analysis of civil discourse strategies for social studies were selected from among current reputable scholars in the field and nonpartisan research organizations. Foundational works from the field of education were also consulted as a way of grounding social studies in the American public schooling tradition.

While the Johnson brothers, David and Roger, of the University of Minnesota were pioneers in the development of Structured Academic Controversy, most of my understanding of the approach and deeper study of the practice has come from the work of Dr. Diana Hess of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Dr. Paula McAvoy of North Carolina State University. Their books *Controversy in the Classroom* and *The Political Classroom* have been staples on my bookshelf for many years. I have used their model for student deliberation of current issues and adapted it for use with historical inquiry.

I also investigated current political interaction among members of the United States Senate and House of Representatives through the annual research studies from the Pew Research Center. This reputable, non-partisan “fact tank” utilizes sound methodologies to study a variety of topics including politics and policy. Because they have utilized a similar approach to evaluating the political leanings by analyzing rollcall votes over time, I am more confident in accepting the current trends highlighted in the Pew Center’s study. They have longitudinal data that can clearly show the trends of lawmakers becoming less centrist in their ideological leanings.

By using a combination of current scholarly educational research and reputable political analysis data, this article provides a good overview of using social studies to develop civil discourse skills among high school students.