Teaching Constructive Disagreement for a Loyal Opposition, Somatically

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The importance of learning how to disagree constructively has long been valued as a fundamental aspect of democratic life. Yet, while well-known discussion methodologies such as seminars, Structured Academic Controversy (SAC), and discussions of Controversial Public Issues (CPIs) foster essential skills for constructive disagreement, there is little explicit emphasis on connecting constructive disagreement with the concept of a loyal opposition in a democracy. The process of learning how to disagree constructively is also presented as one that is learned solely through intellectual exercises — any exploration of the body’s role in this process is generally ignored. This document argues that by more clearly linking constructive disagreement with the place of a loyal opposition in a democracy and by considering the body as an additional “entry point,” educators would be making a stronger case for the place of constructive disagreement skills in the social studies curriculum.

Introduction

On November 6, 2001, approximately two months after the World Trade Tower attacks of September 11, President George Bush held a joint news conference with President Jacques Chirac of France. In that news conference President Bush stated:

A coalition partner must do more than just express sympathy; a coalition partner must perform. That means different things for different nations. Some nations don’t want to contribute troops and we understand that…but all nations, if they want to fight terrorism, must do something... You’re either with us or against us in the fight against terror [italics added]. (Gelman, 2008)

Soon after President Bush’s statement, the Bill of Rights Foundation (2002) organized a public, written response to the President that was published in many different newspapers. In part, their statement said:

We refuse to allow you to speak for all the American people. We will not give up our right to question. We will not hand over our consciences in return for a hollow promise of safety…We also draw on the many examples of resistance and conscience from the past of the United States: from those who fought slavery with rebellions and the Underground Railroad …

In this statement the Bill of Rights Foundation was risking condemnation from the President and possibly other citizens in order to lay claim to a fundamental right of a democracy: the right to disagree. Several years later, Ross (2003) argued that the position taken by President Bush in November 2001 presented a false choice between “tyranny and terror.” Either United States citizens had to accept, without question, the actions of an elected leader, or they would fall prey to the chaos and subsequent terrorist acts that disagreement and discussion would inevitably foster. Both Ross and the Bill of Rights Foundation were claiming the role of a loyal opposition in a time when the nation had declared a “war on
terror.” Rather than cutting off discussion, they both argued that President Bush should have been modeling how to engage in dialogues with diverse points of view and modeling how disagreement can inform decision making in order to exemplify how a fearless democracy acts. (As will be made clear later in this paper, there is no attempt here to condemn one party or political perspective over another. In the course of U.S. history, the loyal opposition has been represented by the full range of political perspectives, and Presidents of every party have not always welcomed its presence.)

Within the field of social studies, learning how to listen to and respect diverse points of view has been advocated by many scholars (Engle, 1960; Hess 2002, 2005; Johnson & Johnson, 1985; Newmann & Oliver, 1970; Oliver & Newmann, 1967; Parker, 2003). Yet, while discussion methodologies are generally structured to foster constructive disagreement, which is the ability to disagree with a person’s ideas while respecting the person who holds them, there is little explicit connection made between learning how to disagree constructively and the concept of a loyal opposition in a democracy. In addition, the process of learning how to disagree constructively is generally presented as one learned solely through intellectual exercises — any exploration of disagreement as a somatic (from the Greek root *soma* meaning of the body) experience, is generally ignored. In this paper, we argue that by more clearly locating the learning of constructive disagreement skills within the larger concept of a loyal opposition in a democracy, social studies educators would have a stronger rationale for advocating the use of genuine discussion in classrooms, and they would be raising awareness of this critical component of democratic life — a component that recent events reveal is a perennial source of contention. Secondly, in an effort to encourage social studies educators to explore somatic approaches whereby students might deepen their understanding of and ability to disagree constructively, we review the use of martial arts interventions in school settings and make the case for imagining Aikido as a vehicle for democratic education and for learning how to be a member of the loyal opposition, in particular. We close with suggestions for future research based on the theoretical framework presented in this paper.

Disagreement, Discussion, and Democratic Education

The National Council for the Social Studies (2001) has claimed, in two separate statements, *Preparing Citizens for a Global Community* and *Creating Effective Citizens*, that to build civic competence (defined as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for the office of citizen in a democratic, multicultural republic), students need opportunities to engage one another in critical analysis of the issues and dilemmas that humans face. Classroom discussion, defined as “a kind of shared inquiry the desired outcomes of which rely on the expression and consideration of diverse views” (Parker, 2003 p. 129) has long been considered a key vehicle for developing civic competence (Engle 1960; Hess 2002; Johnson & Johnson 1985; Oliver and Newmann 1967). The ability to consider points of view different from and even antithetical to one’s own requires that participants do something difficult and existential. Discussants must “…switch loyalties from justifying positions and defending ground to listening intently, seeking understanding, and expressing ideas that are underdeveloped and in progress” (Parker, 2003, p.129).

At the heart of a genuine discussion lies Dewey’s (1910/1997) *double movement of reflection* wherein an individual moves back and forth from a hypothesis or belief about something or someone to the facts that inform that belief and then back to the hypothesis — basically, from induction to deduction and back in an ongoing cycle. Conclusions are always held as tentative due to the fact that new data might well lead to the revision of an
existing hypothesis. Parker (2003) has argued it is “because of the collective problems and diversity contained within them” that schools offer the best potential as a public place where genuine discussions and deliberations can occur: “Problems and differences are the essential assets for cultivating democrats” (p. 78). Civic competence in a multicultural society is intimately tied to the idea that individual differences such as race, socio-economic status, culture, language, religion, sexual orientation, and ethnicity are to be recognized, respected, and embraced for purposes of the common good (Banks, 1996, 1997; Miller-Lane, Howard, & Halagao, 2007).

Learning how to disagree constructively is no simple task. Simply put, by disagreement, we refer to those moments in a discussion when participants express different perspectives that challenge those previously stated and/or considered by the group. The causes of a particular disagreement are not of concern here. Rather, the issue is how students learn to disagree without fostering bitterness and hatred. The challenge for the teacher and the other participants is to maintain the conditions of discussion during those moments when disagreement may threaten to turn a discussion into a debate in which participants simply defend a position and seek to score points (Barnlund & Haiman, 1960; Parker 2003). To disagree constructively is to maintain the commitment to deepen understanding of the issue under discussion rather than to win or be “right.”

Numerous discussion models that foster disagreement skills have been advanced. We review four (seminars, Structured Academic Controversies, Controversial Public Issues, and Public Issue Forums) in order to highlight the fact that while each model has a distinct approach to discussion, all share a commitment to a set of ground rules intended to create the conditions for constructive disagreement. The discussion method known as seminar is the oldest of the four models. Often called Socratic Seminars in honor of the Greek philosopher who used dialogue and questioning to pursue deeper meaning, seminars depend on thoughtfull questions and well-selected texts. The sole purpose of a seminar is for participants to develop a deepened or enlarged understanding of the text under consideration. While written texts are the most common form of texts used, seminars may also examine a film, statute, symbol, or photograph. Currently, the National Paidea Center (NPC) is perhaps the best known advocate for the use of seminars in classrooms and advocates teachers’ use of seminars as one of the three essential pedagogies that strengthen students’ conceptual understanding of the content — didactic instruction and intellectual coaching being the other two. Seminar facilitators are encouraged to provide a sentence stem that begins, “I disagree with ______ because…” to both explicitly make the point that disagreement is encouraged and to provide a model for how to do so courteously and respectfully. Participants are asked to sit in a circle so all can be seen and not to raise hands waiting for recognition from the facilitator, but rather to begin speaking when they have something to say and there is an opportunity to do so.

Johnson and Johnson (1988) developed the discussion model entitled Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) as a means of engaging students in evocative group work. In SACs, students are organized into groups of four and are given a common reading that describes the disagreements surrounding a particular academic question, for example: a) Why did the United States wait until Pearl Harbor to enter WWII? and b) In what sense, if any, was the Revolutionary War a revolution? Students are then separated in pairs and assigned a “for” or “against” position. Each pair is provided with readings that support the particular position they have been assigned to defend. After studying their respective positions, the pairs then recombine as a group of four and each side is asked to present their point of view. During this exchange, there is the added
requirement that the opposite side repeat back what they have heard after the other pair has presented. Once the presentations are completed, students are asked to drop their assigned positions and express their own point of view. Students are encouraged to work through the issues together and either to come to agreement or to clarify the nature of the disagreement they genuinely hold. The structure of a SAC is designed to suggest that after reading and analyzing the same information thoughtful people can come to different conclusions regarding what the best answer to a question might be.

According to Hess (2001), “A Controversial Public Issue [CPI] is an unresolved question of public policy that sparks significant disagreement” (p. 2), and examples include the following issues: a) Should the drinking age be lowered to 18? b) Should the state institute an income tax in order to pay for schools rather than depend on the state lottery for funds? (c) Should the United States withdraw its military forces from Iraq by the end of the year? To qualify as a CPI, the controversy must be in the public eye, and some “public” either informs or makes the decision regarding the policy under discussion and there is genuine disagreement regarding the best solution. A CPI discussion may take the form of a deliberation, role-play simulation, or whole-class discussion. Whatever the actual structure, the question at hand must meet the above criteria and students must be provided with thoughtful material that will inform, challenge, and complicate their thinking on the question (Hess, 2001).

The fourth model of discussion, National Issues Forums (NIF), is different from the above three as it is sponsored by a particular non-profit foundation, the Kettering Foundation. It is intended to be used in public forums as well as schools. Under the mantra, “think, deliberate, act,” NIF staff prepare booklets around particular topics. For education, the question currently under discussion is “Too many children left behind: How do we close the achievement gap?” The booklet for this discussion includes a common background reading and then presents three different responses to the question. NIF materials always provide three or more positions to make explicit that there are always more than two sides to an issue. Once participants are gathered together, an NIF-prepared video is shown that amplifies the common reading and the three (or more) positions. The moderator than facilitates a discussion around the different positions — the process usually includes small and large group discussions. The forum ends with the moderator asking participants to share new understandings gained from the process and to state whether they have been moved to make a commitment to do something about the issue under consideration.

All four models discussed above make explicit use of a formal structure of facilitation. In seminars, it is the rules of engagement and coaching participants with an actual sentence that begins with “I disagree…”. In SACs, it is the series of steps that requires students to listen to and repeat back a different point of view before beginning to share one’s own perspective. In CPIs, it is the careful selection of a contested public policy issue. In the NIF, it is a commitment to always present three or more points of view to ensure that a bipolar discussion does not occur. Furthermore, in each model, the selection of the question that directs the discussion undergoes careful scrutiny to ensure it will foster disagreement. The conclusion we draw from these four methodologies is that if disagreement is to be facilitated, there must be an explicit structure in place that provides clear ground rules in order to ensure that the disagreements remain constructive rather than destructive. Structure and procedures matter when discussions are intended to elicit diverse perspectives and, thereby, disagreement.

The importance of purposeful structure emphasized in discussion methodologies is also stressed in the work of those engaged in school based conflict mediation and resolution.
The “Peacable Classroom” model advocated by Kreidler (1990), O’Reilly (1993), Levin (1994), and Lantieri and Patti (1996) combine a comprehensive theoretical framework with precise pedagogical techniques. Educators are encouraged to make explicit the goals of nonviolence while developing students’ ability to interact constructively. Similar to the discussion models discussed above, the goal of the Peaceable Classroom approach is not to create a classroom where there is no disagreement but rather to create structures whereby classroom disagreements can inform discussion and decision-making without destroying relationships. In their review of the literature, Jones and Kmitta (2000) found that conflict resolution education had consistent and significant impact on both children’s academic achievement and self-control and communication skills. Given teachers’ growing interest in engaging in global issues in the classroom since 9/11 (Hess & Stoddard, 2007; Ukpokodu, 2006), an understanding of how to engage in such fertile fields of disagreement is crucial.

Constructive Disagreement and a Loyal Opposition

The phrase, “His Majesty’s Loyal Opposition” was first used after a speech given by Sir John Cam Hobhouse on the floor of the House of Commons of England in 1826. The term came to denote a political party or group of parties that was completely loyal to the conventions of the state but “equally obliged to take office should its activities make government by those in power unfeasible or impossible” (Foord, 1964, p. 2). Among the more famous expressions of the concept of the loyal opposition occurred in the United States in a speech given by the Republican Party’s nominee for President, Wendell Wilkie, on November 11, 1940. After losing the race for the Presidency to the Democratic candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt, Wilkie accepted Roosevelt’s victory while arguing for the right and responsibility to continue to offer alternative perspectives. “A vital element in the balanced operation of democracy is a strong, alert, and watchful opposition,” Wilkie argued, and the notion that during a time of war all opposition must cease and there must be one dominant party to which all should swear blind allegiance was “a totalitarian idea, a slave idea, and must be rejected utterly.” Wilkie noted that a democratic government is one of laws and principles and the war in Europe was being fought precisely to preserve the right to disagree and challenge the government in power:

Any member of the minority party, though willing to die for his country, still retains the right to criticize the policies of the government. This right is embedded in the constitutional system...We, who stand ready to serve our country behind our Commander in Chief, nevertheless retain the right, and I will say the duty, to debate the course of our government. (Wilkie, 2005)

Wilkie’s statement from 60 years ago makes clear that it is during wartime when the place of a loyal opposition may be most critical. Wilkie was the Republican candidate for President who had lost to the Democrat President Roosevelt in 1940. In 2001, it was a Republican who was President, and the loyal opposition, as expressed by the Bill of Rights Foundation and Ross (2003), represented perspectives predominantly from the Left. It is imperative to stress that no party remains in the role of the loyal opposition for perpetuity; it is the right of all citizens to engage that role when their consciences so dictate. A citizenry and its leaders need regular reminders of the critical place of a loyal opposition in a democracy.

Learning to disagree constructively is part of a vision that sees democracy as both a form of government and a way of life that places particular demands on its citizens (Dewey, 1916/1944) including the responsibility to
publicly oppose a government in power if and when the rights of citizens are under threat. Relating to the discussion of methodologies above, while the term “loyal opposition” is not explicitly used, a similar principle is embedded in the idea of constructive and structured disagreement found in seminars, Structured Academic Controversies (SACs), Controversial Public Issues (CPIs), and National Issue Forums. The “loyalty” in these discussion methodologies is to the rules of engagement that establish democratic norms of discussion and dialogue. “Opposition” is encouraged by the very structure of the method that requires students to take different perspectives. While the act of disagreeing with a classmate in the relatively safe environment of a classroom is not likely to carry the same risks as challenging a sitting government with all the resources at its disposal, the former provides school-based practice for imagining doing the latter. Advocates and supporters of these discussion models are in positions to make this connection between constructive disagreement and the loyal opposition explicit and, thereby, better inform students of their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

**Learning to Constructively Disagree Somatically**

The following effort to link the learning of how to be a member of the loyal opposition with a somatic practice is grounded in a growing body of scholarship that calls for greater recognition of the natural links between mind and body. The rationale for exploring the use of a martial art in particular is grounded in research on martial arts interventions and the unique potential of Aikido to teach the skills of constructive rather than destructive disagreement.

**Why the Body Should Matter to Educators**

Philosophers such as Code (1991) and Johnson (2007), neuroscientists such as Damasio (2005), feminist scholars such as Gatens (1996) and Jagger and Bordo (1989), as well as cognitive theorists such as Gardner (1983, 1999) and Egan (1997) have all posited theoretical frameworks to support the claim that to separate the mind from the body in an educational context is incoherent. Echoing Dewey’s (1934) notion of the body-mind, these scholars argue that learning always involves inextricable links between mind and body, and one can never be separated from the other. Indeed, although rarely addressed in the discussion literature (as an exception see Quantz, 2001), the very practice of constructive disagreement requires discussants to become conscious of and then control potential physical responses such as striking a classmate in anger and frustration or gesturing to another in an intimidating manner. To disagree constructively presumes a non-threatening body posture and a certain level of physical calm suggesting that discussion is a somatic activity as well as an intellectual activity.

Clinical data regarding the impact of programs such as Brain-Gym, designed to increase neural activity between left and right sides of the brain through specific physical activities also suggest that mind-body links are worth investigating (Hughes, 2002). Indeed, Damasio’s (1994) own clinical research on the impact of brain trauma on specific neural functions is what led him to propose his theories of the somatic marker hypothesis in which he posits a direct link between physical responses and cognitive understanding as well as the presence of an emotional intelligence, i.e., that human emotions have specific cognitive functions (Damasio, 1999). In his review of the research, Lawton (2008) found strong clinical evidence that the brains of young and old alike can be trained through physical practices for specific tasks such as improving memory or reading. Hughes (2002) reported on two specific cases where Brain Gym exercise enabled two students with learning disabilities to improve their reading skills. Hyatt’s (2007) survey also found promising clinical results in
specific instances linking Brain-Gym like trainings with cognitive development. Clearly, much more research must be done. However, the growing body of evidence suggests that social studies educators may benefit from exploring somatic entry points for the teaching of essential civic skills.

A Somatic Practice: Martial Arts in Schools

Martial arts programs have been used in United States schools for a number of years. Most commonly, such programs are used with children in grades 6-12 who have special needs, who have demonstrated “delinquent” tendencies or behavior, or who have committed violent acts either at home or at school (Howard, Flora, & Griffin, 1999). A martial arts-based intervention is often more affordable for schools than other violence-prevention programs and is, therefore, an interesting alternative. Many programs have been implemented into school systems on a short-term trial basis, and most have showed qualitative improvements in the children’s behavior or outlook. Many subjects displayed lasting changes in measured qualities that often included self-discipline, self-worth, and social outlook. In the past, martial arts were considered suitable only for physical education as “an exciting addition to the physical education curriculum” (Winkle & Ozmun, 2003, p. 49). However, martial arts are slowly becoming more integrated into schools.

The desired effect of martial arts-based violence prevention programs is usually to foster greater self-discipline in an effort to prevent further violent behavior. Interventions typically involve a schedule of training including form practice, meditation, and, in some cases, discussion of the philosophy of the martial art. Martial arts’ styles in these studies range from what might be considered a very hard striking art such as Tae Kwon Do to the softer, more flowing moves of Tai Chi. Although martial arts are stereotypically linked to the promotion of violence in large part due to movies produced in Hollywood and Hong Kong, Twemlow and Sacco (1998) argue that “the key therapeutic elements [of martial arts] are the teacher as role model, the use of physical exercise, the philosophy of ethical behavior and restraint, and group participation” (p. 505). Contrary to the movie stereotype, the philosophy behind these martial arts, and, therefore, behind the violence prevention programs is a nonviolent one. The goal is for students to learn restraint and self-discipline not more effective ways to hurt people.

The full extent of the effectiveness of these martial arts programs remains inconclusive. Howard, Flora, and Griffin (2005) found that traditional violence-prevention programs have had various levels of success with many being ultimately unsuccessful. However, Zivin, et al., (2001) found that if a particular approach is used, “there is strong evidence that requiring traditional martial arts training for high-risk youths is effective in reducing violent behaviors and personal characteristics associated with violence and delinquency” (p. 443). A specific combination of instruction was required for the martial arts intervention to produce the desired outcome:

- Three factors deserve mention as potent and unique components of the experience:
  1) Self-respect and respect for others, regardless of status or skill, was embodied in the discussed philosophy, exemplified by the teacher, and required of the students;
  2) The moving meditation gave three-times-weekly practice in calming. This begins to retrain the boys’ nervous system away from impulsive reaction. Boys reported using breathing techniques for stress control in daily life, and
  3) The instructor showed genuine interest in and concern for each student. Per-
haps his positive influence was aug-
mented by his strength of character and
his being a respected member of the lo-
cal community. (p. 444)

Of great importance in the above study is
that positive outcomes were found when the
instructor explicitly discussed the purpose of
the practice and its underlying philosophy.
Lakes and Hoyt (2005) found similar results in
an unusual study involving 207 children ages
K-5. Those who participated in three months
of traditional Tae Kwon Do training (with
philosophy articulated and discussed) had
significant improvements regarding self
control in cognitive, affective, and physical
domains relative to the control group who
participated in a traditional physical education
program. Lakes and Hoyt (2004) also found
that although both groups increased self-
regulation on all domains relative to traditional
physical education, boys benefited more than
girls through the intervention.

Trulson (1986) at Texas A&M University
conducted a study comparing three groups of
male high school students who had been
labeled juvenile delinquents. All the boys
received training in either traditional Tae
Kwon Do or a “modern version of the martial
art,” which Trulson explains, “did not empha-
size the psychological/philosophical aspects of
the sport as the [original] Korean version did”
(p. 1131). The third group received regular
exercise and met with the martial arts instruc-
tor on a regular basis. Trulson found that
although “all three groups were trained by the
same (male) instructor” and the students “were
not told the purpose of the study”:

The group receiving traditional Tae
Kwon Do training showed aggressiveness
scores that were below average…
lowered anxiety, increased self-esteem,
increased social adroitness, and an in-
crease in value orthodoxy. Group II stu-
dents [modern martial art without phi-
losophy], on the other hand, showed an
even greater tendency toward delin-
quency… than they did at the beginning
of the study, a very large increase in ag-
gressiveness… Group III students [regu-
lar exercise] showed no notable differ-
ces on any of the personality meas-
ures.” (p. 1131)

This discrepancy in outcome is significant and
may explain why Howard, Flora, and Griffin
(2005) found a great variety in the efficacy of
martial arts-based violence prevention pro-
grams. Trulson (1986) states, “The majority of
… clubs and schools teach only fighting and
self-defense techniques, and our data reveal
that this type of training enhances the negative
personality traits of people who are already
delinquent” (p.1131), so in other words, if a
martial art is presented as a spiritual and
philosophical approach to self-development,
the physical training becomes a means to
embody that philosophy of integrity, disci-
pline, and non-violence, and the physical
training is far more likely to have a positive
effect on the violent tendencies of youth.
However, if the instruction focuses solely on
the physical practice, students may, in fact,
learn more effective means to carry out their
violent impulses.

**The Specific Case for Aikido**

The founder of Aikido (eye-KEY-dough),
Morehei Ueshiba O’Sensei (1883-1969) was a
master martial artist from Wakayama Prefec-
ture in Japan. Ueshiba believed that Aikido
practice fostered “the loving protection of all
things” and represented the true expression of
Budo (the way of the warrior). Ueshiba in-
tended Aikido techniques to be an effective
means of self-defense, but self-defense was the
by-product of refining the spirit and develop-
ing powerful compassion. Rather than respond
to an attack with a killing strike or debilitating
blow, he trained Aikido practitioners to seek an
alternative response that enabled the attack to
be diffused without harming the aggressor.
This is why Aikido is often referred to as “The Way of Harmony” (Stevens, 2001) and takes years of training in order to be martially effective. It is far easier to learn how to strike or kick an attacker in a vulnerable place in order to neutralize an attack than it is to connect and blend with him or her and seek an end to the encounter so that neither attacker nor defender is injured.

While learning how to respond to an aggressor with compassion rather than with a brutal counter strike is difficult (just ask any educator at any level committed to teaching students how to disagree constructively), the process of learning how to give a good attack and then respond supplely to the defensive technique that is employed in response to the attack is arguably even more difficult. Aikido provides unique opportunities to learn this complex and critical skill for democratic life. During training, an Aikido aggressor must attack his or her partner with full commitment yet, at the same time, be sufficiently pliable to blend with the defensive technique itself in order to be able to train another day (Saotome, 1993). There are no counter strikes or debilitating blows in response to an attack or what might be termed a physical disagreement. Instead, circular and blending movements that enable a defender to blend with an attack characterize Aikido techniques (Dobson & Miller, 1993). The difference between Aikido and other martial arts is similar to the difference between a debate and genuine discussion. In a debate and in most popular images of martial arts, there is a winner and a loser after every encounter — spectacular roundhouse kicks (verbal jabs) wipe out multiple miscreants in a single swipe. In discussion and in Aikido practice, there is deepened understanding and greater appreciation for one’s partner.

**Aikido In and Outside of Schools**

While school-affiliated martial arts programs have been primarily associated with violence prevention programs, martial arts practice has also been used outside the K-12 world as an embodied metaphor for values associated with discussion and positive human interactions. Indeed, it in this context where Aikido studies are most commonly found. We provide a summary of one inside-school Aikido intervention before considering interventions and studies of Aikido practice outside of schools.

In an intervention program for severely emotionally disturbed students in which Aikido was used, Edelman (1994) found significant positive change in student behaviors. The intervention was designed to reduce disruptive classroom behaviors and verbally abusive and physically assultive behaviors toward other students and staff members and to decrease the number of school-wide disciplinary referrals for violent behaviors. Students were enrolled in a twelve-week training program that integrated form practice with presentation and discussion of the philosophy of Aikido. Relaxation techniques were also part of the program. Here again, positive changes were made as noticed by teachers, administrators, and parents. Of significance is that conflict de-escalation skills were greatly improved. In other words, a student’s ability to self-monitor and de-escalate their own rise to violence was enhanced — they were learning to disagree more constructively.

Outside of schools, Aikido philosophy has also been of importance to Aikido studies and interventions. The practice of blending with a person’s energy or intention in order to redirect it, a fundamental tenet of Aikido, was used to train participants for admissions interviews so that individuals could better direct the flow of conversation (Chew, 1995). Learning how to physically connect with a partner in training has been used as practice and metaphor for helping individuals be more present in the learning experience (Oberg, 1991). In their study of eight psychotherapists who were also highly skilled in Aikido, Faggianelli and Lukoff (2006) found that all eight stated that Aikido deeply informed their work as psycho-
therapists. The ability to be present while listening to a client, the ability to connect with their clients’ statements, their ability to avoid or “get off the line” rather than react aggressively to a verbal challenge were all metaphorically and isomorphically related to Aikido practice for these psychotherapists. Martin (2004) has argued that four principles of Aikido: centering yourself, connecting with the aggressor, channeling the attack so that neither aggressor or defender is harmed, and safely concluding the interaction are the essential components of successful conflict resolution. In his case study of children’s classes, Martin found that Aikido offered a means to teach conflict resolution skills through the body.

In summary, martial arts literature suggests that a martial art, and, perhaps, Aikido in particular, may be a fertile entry point (Gardner, 1993) for informing an individual’s understanding of constructive disagreement. Similar to aspects of the martial arts stressed in the examples above, constructive disagreement requires that one learn to self-regulate and de-escalate an aggressive impulse when confronted with a perspective (a verbal attack) that challenges one’s own cherished beliefs. Formal structures that contain and channel disagreement as well as explicit discussion of the larger purpose of improved human relations characterize the successful martial arts interventions and are also found in the four discussion methodologies discussed earlier in the paper. If social studies educators are to look for somatic entry points for the teaching of constructive disagreement, a martial art such as Aikido that has at its core a commitment to compassion and non-injurious interaction may be a good choice.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research

In this paper, we have argued that discussion advocates should make explicit links between the skills learned through formal discussion methodologies such as SACs, CPIs, seminars, and NIFs and the concept of a loyal opposition in a democracy. We have further argued that social studies educators should investigate somatic practices as a means to foster a deeper understanding of what it means to act in the role of the loyal opposition. The martial arts and Aikido, in particular, may be uniquely relevant tools for such an effort. Yet, as Picket and Carson (2006) have pointed out, the inclusion of unusual teaching strategies are often problematic for bureaucratic reasons that have nothing to do with the merit of the idea or practice being proposed. Furthermore, in order to evaluate the extent of Aikido’s potential, more research involving well-structured, school-based interventions are needed. How much Aikido and which particular practices are best suited to foster the skills of constructive disagreement? Given that teachers themselves must be able to lead the discussion methodologies discussed above, what sort of Aikido interventions might inform social studies teachers’ abilities to facilitate discussion and constructive disagreement? What is realistic? These questions suggest fruitful avenues for future research.

References


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1 We have purposefully not used the term “Socratic Seminar” in this paper as we find the title to be an oxymoron. While Socrates did use questioning, Platonic Dialogues in which Socrates stars rarely model the kind of inclusive, multi-voiced discussion that a high school social studies seminar is meant to foster. The single word seminar has roots in German “seed plot” and thus, more effectively brings to mind notions of a group developing understanding rather than an image of a sage leading a novitiate along the path of truth.