The Role of Emotion in Democratic Dialogue: A Self Study

Michelle Reidel
Georgia Southern University
Cinthia Salinas
University of Texas, Austin

This study contributes to existing scholarship on democratic education by focusing explicitly on the affective dynamics of teaching with and for discussion. More specifically, the purpose of this research is to critically analyze the first author’s efforts to address the role of emotion in democratic dialogue within the context of classroom-based discussions and the work of preparing future social studies educators for their role as discussion facilitators. We found that despite the instructor’s stated goals and her efforts to teach about the constructive role of emotion in learning to communicate across difference, overall, students continued to judge dispassionate and disembodied speech acts as appropriate, while expressions of anger, frustration, or exasperation were judged inappropriate. More specifically, if a female student spoke with anger or frustration during class discussions, her concerns, ideas, and questions tended to be ridiculed, ignored, or dismissed, while the same emotional rule did not apply to male students. If our intent is to facilitate communication across difference, we must actively attend to the ways in which social hierarchies inform discussion by carefully considering how emotional expression and experiences are positioned.

Key Words: Democracy, Democratic education, Discussion, Emotion, Self-study, Social studies teacher education

Introduction

Living with the reality that “all events are interpreted differently by different people” is intellectual and emotional work (Marx, 2006, p. xi). It can be uncomfortable and painful, joyful and liberating all at the same time. In the abstract, the assertion that there is no single definitive interpretation of our lives and the world around us is relatively easy to accept. Safely ensconced in the realm of the theoretical, the ambiguity of meaning that is reality does not appear to be threatening nor challenging; it is common sense. It is in the particular --- when our gaze shifts from the abstract to the local, the specific, and the personal --- that it becomes exceedingly difficult to imagine perspectives other than our own as equally valid and significant. When challenged by alternatives suggesting the world is not as we believe it to be, we can become defensive, angry, withdrawn, even frightened. Lines are drawn. Relationships severed. Community --- if it ever existed --- is lost. Learning how to move through this impasse is essential practice for citizens in a democratic, multicultural society.

Democracy typically is understood and discussed solely as a form of government. The process of elections, rights guaranteed by the Constitution and the limits of presidential power number among the catalogue of structural features conventionally assigned to dem-
ocratic societies. Traditional approaches to democratic education focus primarily on these procedural and institutional aspects of democracy. Over the last three decades, social studies educators and scholars have labored to shift this focus by attending closely to the role of citizens, highlighting how to participate in democracy rather than simply admire it from afar. At the heart of these efforts is a broader vision of democracy as a way of living with others rather than a state-centric form of government (Burch, 2000; Dewey, 1985; Parker, 2002.) Viewing democracy as a “shared path,” these scholars argue that learning to communicate across difference is essential practice for citizens in a multicultural democracy (Parker, 2002; Young, 2000). Dialogue is delineated as not only an essential process in democratic governance, but as a core goal of democracy and as a result, teaching with and for discussion has become an increasingly popular focus of democratic education (Hess, 2009). The importance of teaching discussion skills, pre-paring for discussion, and creating a safe class-room environment have all been highlighted; yet the difficult emotional dynamics of communicating across difference, such as those depicted above, have not been fully explored.

This study contributes to existing scholarship on democratic education by focusing explicitly on the affective dynamics of teaching with and for discussion. More specifically, the purpose of this research study is to critically analyze the first author’s efforts to address the role of emotion in democratic dialogue within the context of classroom-based discussions and the work of preparing future social studies educators for their role as discussion facilita-tors.

Democracy, Discussion, and Social Studies Education

Democracy involves public discussion of problems not just the silent counting of individual hands.” Jane Mansbridge (1991) In Democracy and Education, John Dewey (1985) proposed that democracy is a “state of being” and as such, its primary features are associational rather than individualistic or institutional (p. 240). From Castoriadis, who describes democracy as community and self-transcendence to Dewey, who suggested that democracy is a “form of moral and spiritual association,” our on-going, centuries-long conversation about democracy has never been limited to its structural or institutional dimensions (Castoriadis, 1995; Dewey, 1985). What Dewey and scholars such as Walter Parker (2002), C. Douglas Lummis, Sheldon Wolin, and Kerry Burch, consistently remind us, is that our relationships with each other inform and shape the structural and institutional features of democracy. Relationship and emotional engagement are not byproducts of democracy but necessary ingredients.

In Teaching Democracy, Parker contends that democracy is “not given in nature” but is a social construct we create (Parker, 2002, p. xvii). It is a “creative, constructive process,” a journey or a path that we travel together rather than in isolation (Parker, 2002, p. 21). The direction and quality of the path --- of our democracy --- depends as much upon how we live together as families, friends, and neighbors as it does upon the structural features (the Constitution) that guide its construction. Learning to communicate across difference is vital to forging the relationships upon which democracy depends.

Social studies educators have long promoted the integration of discussion, multiple perspectives, and controversial issues into the curriculum as a vital and essential component of democratic education (Hess, 2008; 2009; Parker, 2008). The National Council for the
Social Studies (NCSS) and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) both recommend the use of discussion in social studies classrooms as a way to prepare young people to effectively participate in our democratic society (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2002). Beginning in the 1970s, research has consistently demonstrated that students whom are provided with opportunities to discuss important issues have a “greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communication skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school” (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2002, p.8). Social studies educators and political scientists contend that students who are provided with opportunities to consider and discuss important public issues from multiple perspectives demonstrate “positive citizenship outcomes” such as increased civic participation and increased political efficacy (Hess, 2008; Parker, 2008). David Campbell’s (2005) research, for example, focuses on the ways in which classroom discussions can inform adolescents’ and young adults’ political engagement. Utilizing data from International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, Campbell (2005) found that the creation and maintenance of an “open classroom climate” --- one in which students feel free to openly disagree with teachers and feel that teachers respect their opinions – is positively related to adolescents’ knowledge of and participation in democratic processes (p.450). Much of the research on the integration of discussion, controversial issues, and multiple perspectives into social studies curricula examines different pedagogical approaches, teachers’ roles in framing and facilitating discussion and the ways in which discussion can inform and enrich students’ learning (Hess, 2008; 2009; Parker, 2008). Diane Hess’ extensive research on teaching about controversial issues reveals the importance of both deliberately teaching students discussion skills and providing students with access to background knowledge they need to meaningful participate (Hess, 2002; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Hess, 2009).

Proponents of discussion also argue that discussion provides a context for students to “develop, understand and commit to democratic values, learn important content knowledge and build more sophisticated interpersonal skills” (Hess, 2008, p.124). Each of these potential benefits, learning outcomes, and experiences depend upon the abilities of social studies educators to effectively plan and facilitate discussions with their students. Drawing on extensive research in civic education, Patricia Avery (2003) argues that social studies teachers need “extensive practice in facilitating discussion” (p. 57). Walter Parker (2001) suggests that this practice should include the “demonstration of purposeful discussion leadership” by teacher educators (p.117). More specifically, pre-service social studies teachers need opportunities to participate in discussions about controversial issues, to facilitate discussions with their peers, to plan discussion-based lessons for K-12 students, and to debrief these experiences with others (Parker, 2001). Central to learning how to facilitate discussion is the ability to clearly articulate the overarching purpose for the discussion and to utilize a discussion format or model that will most effectively serve this identified purpose (Parker, 2001). Crafting powerful opening questions, selecting texts for students to read in preparation for discussion and monitoring participation to ensure that no student dominates, are all essential discussion facilitation skills that pre-service social studies teachers must explicitly learn and practice. Both Parker (2001) and Avery (2003) also note that pre-service teachers need to learn how to guide the development of discussion norms and standards with their students.
The Affective Dimensions of Discussion

Though the importance of creating and maintaining a classroom culture within which students “feel safe” to express their ideas is stressed, few studies explicitly explore the affective dynamics of discussion or problematize the concept of safety. Nor are these issues addressed in the existing literature on social studies teacher education (Adler, 2008). There is general agreement that ‘feeling safe’ is important but this affective dimension tends to focus solely on how teachers communicate respect for diverse opinions. There is little explication of the ways in which this dynamic may be experienced and felt differently by various students or the pedagogical role of discomfort in learning (Boler, 2004a).

The role of emotion in learning to see differently, to listen to others’ perspectives, and to critically examine one’s own long-standing beliefs and assumptions is simply not addressed (Boler, 1999). Some Social Studies educators do note that emotions are a fundamental component of any discussion and argue that discussants need to learn to “hear and respect one another’s emotions (Parker, 2002, p. 106). Despite this acknowledgement there is no discussion or explanation of how to achieve these goals.

Overall, there is little analysis of the emotions that are expressed during discussion, how they should be addressed or their role in the learning process. In particular, difficult emotions such as anger, frustration, or discomfort are left unexamined or viewed only as a potential problem. There is considerable attention given to teaching and monitoring “civil norms” in the literature on teaching with and for discussion (Hess, 2008, p.130). In general, these civil norms are intended to prevent classroom-based discussions from becoming bullying-sessions and shouting matches by outlining and modeling acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and discourse practices.

Along with justifiable exhortations to denounce name-calling and verbal assaults, delineating civil norms also includes specific articulations of what type of speech is considered suitable, legitimate, or valid. Sarah Michaels, Catherine O’Connor, and Lauren Resnick (2008), for example, utilize the framework of Accountable Talk to delineate specific practices they define as essential in both knowledge building and negotiating solutions to public issues (p. 284). The three types of accountability Michaels, O’Connor, and Resnick delineate as fundamental to “respectful and grounded discussion” include accountability to community, accountability to standards of reasoning and accountability to knowledge (p.286). This three-pronged accountability framework prompts discussion participants to “attend seriously” to the ideas of others, to make concessions when warranted, to utilize publicly accessible information, and to emphasize “logical connections” and “reasonable conclusions” (Michaels, O’Connor, & Resnick, 2008). Accountable talk aims to avoid “noisy assertions” and positions personal experience and knowledge as irrelevant, by emphasizing publically accessible knowledge as “acceptable knowledge” (Michaels, O’Connor & Renisck, 2008, p. 286; 289).
Accountable talk is representative of the ways in which many social studies educators define civil norms for classroom discussion. Reasoned argument, listening, and compromise are essential components of democratic dialogue; yet the role of emotion in discussion is rendered either invisible or solely as a problem within this framework. These norms can operate to avoid, diminish, and disregard “emotional” speech rather than provide a way to incorporate, honor, and understand it. This dynamic is problematic in that it inadvertently privileges some modes of expression over others. In doing so it can operate to silence particular individuals and social groups making the relationships and dialogue upon which democracy depends more difficult to enact and practice.

In *Inclusion and Democracy*, Iris Marion Young (2000) writes extensively about deliberative democracy and “inclusive political communication” (p. 56-79). Young (2000) argues that “the norms, theories, and practices deliberation often assume can privilege some and disadvantage others” (p. 38). These norms are characterized by “articulateness” and “dispassionateness” and are culturally specific (Young, 2000, pp. 38-39). Articulateness, according to Young (2000) is “framed as straightforward expression,” while “circuitous, hesitant, or questioning speech” is defined as unclear or inarticulate speech (p. 38). Dispassionateness is exemplified by a “tone of calm and distance” and is built upon the traditional bifurcation of emotion and reason (Young, p. 38). Young further argues that these norms for democratic deliberation and discussion “correlate with other social privileges” (p.39). In *Inclusion and Democracy*, Young makes this dynamic clear stating …

Young problematizes democratic dialogue and ‘civil norms’ by highlighting the ways in which existing social hierarchies confer varying degrees of legitimacy on different voices. Dominant social and political culture often informs what type of speech is defined as civil and legitimate, while simultaneously positioning other speech acts as ‘excitable’ and ‘inappropriate’ (Boler, 2004b; Butler, 1997). As a result of these dynamics, some scholars posit that discussion can never be truly democratic (Burbules, 2004; deCastell, 2004; Jones, 2004). Simply put, “an egalitarian, reciprocal and respectful model of interchange may be unrealistic to expect in many situations in a society divided by prejudices and imbalances of power” (Burbules, 2004, p. xv). One way in which these inequities are maintained and buffeted is through the privileging of rational dialogue and civil norms that do not allow for or restrict the expression of emotion and experience.

As noted in the introduction, communication across difference is intellectual and emotional work. We can attempt to ignore, silence, or dismiss the emotional dynamics of discussion, but this approach will not result in the rich and thoughtful dialogue upon which a strong democracy depends. It also can serve to reinforce existing social hierarchies and diminish our understanding of the issues being discussed. Avoiding these pitfalls requires careful consideration of the ways in which emotion and emotional expression are positioned within the context of specific communities and discussions.

Learning to engage in dialogue across difference about important political, social, cultural, and economic issues depends upon this kind of work, yet we typically do not prepare
social studies educators to engage in this type of critical inquiry themselves or with their students. Highlighting and repositioning the role of emotion in democratic dialogue is one way to address this gap. In order to do so, we must encourage our students to both “speak and hear one another’s strong feelings,” and to recognize emotions as generative and constructive (Wang, 2008, p. 14). A significant challenge to this work is the traditional and prevailing conceptualization of emotion as an individual, private, and natural phenomenon.

**Theorizing Emotion**

Throughout much of Western history and culture emotions have been viewed with suspicion (Boler, 1999; Schutz & deCuir, 2002; Zemblyas, 2007). In the extreme, emotions are pathologized as something to be buried and denied. Ancient Greek philosophers used the image of master and slave to describe the relationship between emotion and reason, suggesting the ways in which our emotions can control, undermine, and “contaminate” our thinking (Solomon, 2000, p.127). Understood as childish, primitive, or even dangerous, traditional conceptualizations of emotion considered it as some type of natural force that should be feared and controlled (Boler, 1999; Bartky, 1990; Solomon, 2000; Zemblyas, 2007). This dichotomy between reason and emotion has historically --- and in some ways continues to be --- inextricably tied to gender (Boler, 1999; Solomon, 2000). As Boler (1999) explains, “emotions are culturally associated with femininity, ‘soft’ scholarship, the pollution of truth and bias” (p. 109). Within this dominant paradigm, a paradigm elevating thinking over feeling, emotions are viewed as a distraction and a problem rather than as an entry point for understanding ourselves, others, and the systems of privilege and oppression in which we are all entangled.

Feminists and poststructuralist theorists challenge this construction of emotion arguing that anger and pain or joy and humor are not simply private experiences but need to be understood as both politically and socially constructed (Boler, 1999). Work by feminist scholars such as Sandra Lee Bartky (1990), Ann Berlak (1989), and Sue Campbell (1994) reveals the ways in which particular historical, cultural, spatial, and social arrangements are embodied in our emotions. These scholars suggest that we must seriously consider emotion if we hope to deepen our understanding of domination, social control, and resistance.

Emotions, Boler (1999) contends, are “neither entirely public nor entirely private but represent a mutual transaction between larger social forces and the ‘internal’ psychic terrain of a person” (p. xxii). This approach to theorizing emotions --- known as the interactionist approach --- differs considerably from both traditional Western conceptualizations of emotion and the psychological and sociological frames that tend to dominate much of the research and literature on the role of emotions in teaching and learning (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Zemblyas, 2007).

The psychological approach focuses on emotions as an individual experience (Leavitt, 1996; Savage, 2004; Zemblyas, 2007). Within this paradigm the purported animosity between thinking and feeling, reason and emotion, is maintained, and emotions are viewed as temporary and universal across different cultural contexts (Leavitt, 1996; Savage, 2004; Zemblyas, 2007). In the sociological or the social constructivist approach emotions are viewed primarily as a social rather than a private individual experience (Leavitt, 1996; Savage, 2004; Zemblyas, 2007). This approach emphasizes the “situated nature” of emotions focusing on the cultural and social contexts of emotional expression (Savage, 2004).

While the psychological approach ignores social, cultural, and political contexts and the sociological approach ignores the body, the interactionist approach highlights how the individual, the social, and the body interact to
create emotions (Leavitt, 1996; Savage, 2004; Zemblyas, 2007). Within the interactionist framework, the intrapersonal and interpersonal components of emotion are not isolated from the power relations within which they exist (Zemblyas, 2003).

Rather, as Michaelas Zemblyas explains, the interactionist approach provides a dynamic and integrative account of “the interpersonal components of emotions along with a consideration of how emotions are embedded in culture, ideology and power relations” (2003, p.118). Central to this approach is an analysis of ways in which emotions act as a site of both social control and resistance (Boler, 1999). This type of analysis requires careful attention to how “a culture assigns different emotional rules to men and women or to people of different social classes or cultural backgrounds” (Boler, 1999, p.8).

Feminist scholars such as Megan Boler, Sandra Lee Bartky, and Sue Campbell argue that these emotional rules often operate to maintain existing hierarchies of gender, class, and race, and that it is only by ‘breaking the rules’ that change occurs. These rules are part of the “politics of emotion,” which allows for, and even celebrates, public expression of certain emotions by certain people while forbidding, pathologizing, and dismissing others (Boler, 1999; Shields, 2002). Boler (1999) extends this discussion of emotion into the classroom asking how emotions “shape the selectivity” of teachers’ and students’ behaviors and actions (p. xviii). In “Teaching for Hope,” Boler (2004a) explores how defensive and fearful responses to challenging curricula are, in part, an expression of identities “under siege,” not simply conservative and reactionary or private and natural feelings (pp. 117-131). These angry protestations are intertwined with basic issues of identity and self-worth, and for those whose worldview is being challenged they also are signs of suffering and loss (Boler, 2004a). Boler (2004a) argues that honoring this pain and helping students “make up” for their loss can promote a more compassionate form of dialogue, comprehension, and community in our classrooms. Positioning emotion as a resource that can help us understand diverse perspectives rather than as a problem can move us closer to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of diverse perspectives. It also can help students and teachers move out of their comfort zones and begin the hard work of re-examining ideas, values, and beliefs presumed to be ‘common sense.’ Rather than silencing or attempting to mollify students’ and teachers’ feelings of anger, resistance, hurt, alienation, and loss, Boler (2004a) argues that these difficult emotions should become a “point of critical inquiry” (p. 124). By asking questions about and investigating our emotions, assumptions, values, and perspectives previously perceived as natural or neutral can be re-situated as particular and socially and politically constructed rather than universal (Boler,1999). Work by feminist scholars suggests that when we interrogate our emotions, we begin to see how these feelings are linked to particular social hierarchies. In doing so, some scholars argue that we move closer to “clear comprehension” or a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural reasons we are attached to particular worldviews (Boler, 2004a, p. 120).

While, in many ways these class discussions might be characterized as ‘effective,’ overall they failed to attend to affective dimensions of learning to facilitate discussion and communicate across difference.
There are at least two significant challenges to engaging in this type of critical inquiry with our students. The first challenge can be students’ initial defensive or reactionary responses to curricula and/or perspectives that fundamentally conflict with their sense of self. Many times, once the wall goes up, the backlash begins and dialogue and learning end. If students feel extremely threatened, it may be difficult if not impossible to ever regain their trust and begin any type of critical reflection about their intense emotional responses. This is tricky terrain. As Hongyu Wang (2008) suggests, it is our job to challenge students but we also need to create opportunities “to travel with our students to ‘difficult knowledge’ in emotionally-sustainable ways” (p. 45 emphasis added). The second challenge is the work of making emotions a ‘legitimate’ topic of inquiry without reducing this inquiry to a self-serving form of navel gazing. As noted above, emotions traditionally have been viewed as private and personal. Construed as the opposite of reason, intellect, and logic, there is an unspoken assumption that discussing or investigating our emotions is not something we do in school. More specifically, within education, “emotion is most often visible as something to be controlled” rather than something to be understood (Boler, 1999, p. xxi).

Considering the above challenges and the ‘messiness’ of emotions, we consider it vital to begin the work of investigating the role of emotion in democratic dialogue by examining our own classroom practices. More specifically, this study focuses on how the first author positions the role of emotion and emotional expression while facilitating discussions among pre-service teachers enrolled in her middle grades social studies methods course. As noted earlier, for pre-service social studies teachers participating in discussions and de-briefing this experience is one important dimension of learning to facilitate discussion. In this regard, the course instructor’s pedagogical choices and actions are part of the curriculum of learning to facilitate discussion and provide one entry point for analyzing how ‘rules’ for emotional expression are modeled --- consciously or unconsciously --- within the context of social studies teacher education. Pre-service teachers enrolled in the middle grades social studies methods course read research on teaching with and for discussion, facilitate small group discussions with their peers, plan and implement discussion-based lessons with middle grades students, and reflect on each of these experiences in their course journals. While each of these activities and readings are important components of the course curriculum, we limit our focus to the discussions facilitated by the course instructor.

Data Collection and Analysis

Grounded in the daily reflective practice of teachers, self-study provides a unique opportunity for educators to explore the ways in which emotion is part of their lived experiences in their classrooms with their students. Since the early 1990s self-study has become an increasingly popular approach among teacher educator researchers (Loughran & Russell, 2002; Loughran, Hamilton, Laboskey, & Russell, 2004). Self-study research includes research in which “participants reflect on their own practice from a research perspective” in order to not only improve their practice but to contribute to existing scholarship on teaching and learning (Kirkwood-Tucker & Bleicher, 2003, p. 205). Reflecting on one’s own practice provides educators with an opportunity to consider the ways in which the emotional dimensions of teaching are not entirely ‘personal’ but embody a complex web of cultural and historical power dynamics. By highlighting the complex relationship between power and emotion, it can also help to reposition emotion as integral to teaching and teacher education. In doing so, self-study can reveal the ways in which emotional expression and experiences are positioned within the context of classroom-based
discussions and if this positioning reifies and/or challenges existing power dynamics. Drawing on the conceptual framework outlined above, we closely examine the ways in which the validity of honoring and exploring emotions within the context of classroom-based discussions was articulated and enacted by the first author and students’ responses to this focus.

This study was conducted at a large regional university in the southern United States. The university is located in a small rural community in the Bible-Belt of the South. The student population of the university is approximately 18,000 and includes a significant number of first generation college students. Roughly 60% of the students are White, 33% are African-American, and there also are small communities of Latino, Asian-American, and international students on campus. These racial demographics are also evident in the College of Education’s middle grades teacher education program. While the special education, elementary, and secondary education programs tend to mirror national trends with over 90% of the teacher candidates enrolled in these programs identified as White, the middle grades teacher education program is significantly more diverse. African-American students constitute approximately 35% of the students enrolled in the middle grades program. The representation of Latino and Asian-American students in the program reflects their overall representation on campus; their numbers are small but they are present. Student enrollment in the special education, elementary, middle grades, and secondary education programs also reflects particular gender patterns. As might be expected, the elementary program is overwhelming female with fewer than 4% of students enrolled in the program identified as male. Females dominate in the special education program as well, while at the secondary level --- especially in social studies --- males are the majority. Overall, enrollment in the middle grades program is evenly split between males and females. Given the above demographics and our interest in exploring the role of emotion in communicating across difference, the specific site selected for this study is the first author’s middle grades social studies methods course. There were 17 students enrolled in the course in the spring of 2009 when this study was conducted. Among these 17 students were three African-American males, two African-American females, four White males, seven White females, and one Asian-American female.

The course instructor and first author of this study is a self-identified White working-class academic. Class as a social construct is difficult to define and constantly evolves. As Pam Annas (1993) notes, “class is less immediately visible than race and gender. One can choose not to pass, to claim one’s identity and heritage and the recognition of complexity that goes along with that or one can choose to deny all this” (p. 170). For those born to blue-collar families and communities, who then move into white-collar, middle class professions, class identity is further complicated. Language and speech is one arena in which the tensions of this transition are difficult to avoid. Working-class academics --- those whose parents had blue-collar jobs and who were the first person in their family to attend college --- must learn to move in a world where people talk differently, express anger differently, and “perhaps don’t even use their hands when they talk” (Annas, 1993, p. 171). The first author has struggled with this tension throughout her academic career and brings to this study her concern for the ways in which norms for classroom discussion can silence and misrepresent some students.

As a Latina in a predominantly White, middle class profession, the second author is equally concerned with the ways in which language and certain forms of expression are labeled as appropriate and inappropriate. If and how culturally and linguistically diverse students are provided opportunities to both learn the ‘language of power’ and utilize their own
unique modes of expression is a driving focus for her research.

A variety of qualitative research methods were utilized to document the activities of the middle grades social studies methods course including the videotaping of class discussions, the collection of artifacts created by students in conjunction with class discussions, and the first author’s reflective weekly journal entries. The middle grades social studies methods course meets once a week for 10 weeks. Each class meeting lasts approximately four hours. Data were collected during the first 10 weeks of the course. Discussion was a central feature of the middle grades social studies methods course. Each week the first 90 minutes of the four-hour class was reserved for discussion. The course instructor used this time to model a variety of discussion formats as well as engage pre-service teachers in dialogue about the politics and practice of teaching social studies. Each week when students arrived the first 15 to 20 minutes of the class was spent ‘breaking bread’ and sharing stories from the field. Students sat in small groups of three or four and animatedly discussed their practicum experiences as the instructor moved around the room visiting with each group. Following the 20 minute ‘greetings, group, and snack’ the instructor reviewed and framed the discussion topic for the week. Discussions were based on weekly assigned readings and were intended to foster reflection about controversial issues in social studies education, such as whose or which historical knowledge should be included in the curriculum; whether or not social studies teachers should share their personal perspectives and opinions with students; and which topics are “too controversial” to be discussed in social studies classrooms. The instructor utilized a different discussion format each week, including Take A Stand, Thought Museum, and Structured Academic Controversy. Discussions typically ran approximately 40 to 50 minutes and included a debriefing session. During the debriefing session students reflect-
that corresponded with the instructor’s efforts to explicitly address the role of emotion and/or emotional expression in discussion and students’ responses to these efforts. Both authors then reviewed these data segments. Open coding was employed to analyze video files and documents. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories that became the foundation for major themes emerging from the data. For example, events preceding the course instructor’s efforts to address emotion and emotional expression and students’ verbal and physical reactions were coded. After the individual analyses, the two researchers met virtually to exchange, read, and sort through all data sources to identify possible themes collectively, independent of previous individual interpretations. To share our findings we provide a snapshot and analysis of the first class discussion along with a review of patterns that emerged over the course of the semester.

**Findings**

“You take everything too personally!” During the first class meeting, the instructor explained the course focus on teaching with and for discussion. As part of this overview she highlighted the ways in which students would have opportunities to participate in, plan, facilitate, and debrief classroom discussions. Particular attention was given to the ways in which weekly discussions facilitated by the instructor were intended to provide models of various discussion formats, guidelines for selecting topics, developing questions for discussion, and the importance of explicitly teaching students discussion skills and norms. Highlighting the importance of community established guidelines for the facilitation of and participation in meaningful discussions, the instructor asked students to collaboratively create discussion guidelines that would be used throughout the semester. To facilitate this process the instructor utilized a crumbled paper discussion format. This discussion format provides an opportunity for participants to share perspectives or ideas they might typically refrain from speaking aloud. In the crumbled paper discussion each idea is shared with the entire group, but these ideas are not attached to a particular student as they are shared anonymously.

Each student was provided with a blank sheet of paper and asked to list what they ‘love’ about class discussions and what they ‘hate.’ Students were instructed to hold nothing back because their ideas, feelings, and comments about discussion as a learning tool would remain anonymous. The class would then use this list to create discussion guidelines that would help them avoid the dynamics of discussion they find ineffective and bothersome. After the three minutes allotted for this quick write, each student crumbled their paper into a ball and placed it in a bag. The instructor then redistributed these crumbled papers, with each student randomly selecting one to read, share, and discuss with a partner and then with the whole class. The instructor recorded these responses on the white board.

As this love/hate list grew, a constant refrain resounded, “I hate it when people take things too personally!” After all responses were shared, the instructor returned to this phrase and asked the class to explain what it meant. “Oh you know,” Larry, a White male student exclaimed, “When they get all offended if you don’t like their idea.” “When someone gets all emotional, that ruins it!” Wayne, another White male student agreed. Others, men and women, White and African-American, chimed in indicating that expressions of anger, hurt, or discomfort were “too personal” and inappropriate for a classroom-based discussion. Cathy, the one Asian-American student in the class, did not contribute to this dialogue but watched and listened silently. Wayne went so far as to suggest that one of the class ‘rules’ for discussion should be that “no one take anything personally.” This suggestion
was greeted with a chorus of affirmation. Only Ebony, an African-American woman, suggested that she wanted her classmates to “express yourself please, rather than holding anything back during our discussions.”

At this point the instructor prompted students to consider why and how the public expression of emotion may not be a problem but a resource for understanding different perspectives. This suggestion met with a few eye rolls, a handful of abbreviated nods, and one audible “give me a break!” There was no follow-up by the instructor; instead she shifted the focus back to the development of guidelines for class discussions. Ultimately, three broad guidelines were agreed upon by the students; no side talk, be prepared, and don’t interrupt. Luckily “don’t take things personally” did not make the final cut.

In many ways, this initial reaction was expected. Given the long-standing animosity towards emotion in Western culture, thought, and practice, it is difficult to imagine an alternative. While explicating the phrase ‘taking things personally,’ no student attempted to delineate how participants or observers might know when this “line” was crossed. There was an unspoken assumption that there are commonly agreed upon standards for what ‘taking things personally’ or ‘getting all emotional’ looks and sounds like. To challenge this thinking the instructor asked,

So … are you saying any emotional expression is a problem? Do we want to make a distinction here between emotional expression and name-calling or hate speech?” For example, is there a difference between someone expressing anger about an issue and someone getting angry with another participant?

Hands were immediately raised, while others simply shouted “Yes!” Almost immediately Wayne stated, “Once someone starts getting angry or upset than it becomes personal and not about the issue or topic anymore.” Here, again, the instructor tried to push students to clarify their thinking asking, “so is it only when people get angry that they are taking things personally?” “No,” Larry quickly interjected, “it’s all of it!”

Again, the instructor attempted to question students about this construction of ‘taking things personally’ as inappropriate and again, she met resistance. Recalling this moment in her journal, she wrote the following:

I could sense their frustration with my questions…like I was ‘beating a dead horse’ to use an old cliché. They had already explained the problem (with emotional expression) but I continued to push and ask questions…I was frustrated as well. It has been over 40 years since the women’s movement helped us recognize that the personal is the political; that the public-private dichotomy is a house of cards and yet, so many continue to cling to this bifurcation! At this point I dropped it.

The tenor of this dialogue, the disregard for ‘taking things personally,’ and genuine reluctance to distinguish between expressions of anger, pain, or frustration, and violent or hateful speech acts is suggestive of the power of traditional conceptualizations of emotion as individual, problematic, and private. In this rejection of emotional expression as valid, the ancient view of emotions as the antithesis of reason or logic is present. ‘Getting emotional’ or ‘taking things personally’ was construed as inappropriate and, as Wayne suggested, off-topic. Emotions in this case are understood solely as a problem, an interruption, and a nuisance. It is interesting to note that the two students most vocal in articulating this view are both White males. While other men or women in the class did not challenge these two students or the position they articulated, neither did they join this dialogue about emotional expression. Though approximately half of the class nodded in agreement as Larry and Wayne spoke, none joined the discussion. Only
Ebony, an African-American woman, questioned this stance.

Traditional conceptualizations of emotion as personal, and a problem, were clearly and strongly articulated and enacted in this first discussion. At the same time, implicit ‘rules’ for acceptable emotional expression also were beginning to form. Larry and Wayne spoke with disdain and exasperation when suggesting that emotional expression was inappropriate in classroom-based discussions. Ebony expressed concern and frustration with this position, suggesting that if we truly embraced this stance, self-censorship would follow. In neither instance did the students acknowledge their own emotional expression or explain why these speech acts were acceptable rather than problematic or inappropriate. Implied in this silence is the students’ willingness to accept some forms of emotional expression and not others. Bringing this dynamic to students’ attention could have provided an opening and opportunity for students and the instructor to consider the complexity of emotion, its role in discussion, and how it can help us understand different perspectives; instead the instructor retreated.

While the instructor utilized questioning strategies to prompt students to reconsider their knee-jerk disdain for emotional expression, she did not pursue this point in any depth. In her journal after this first class session, she reflected on her own unwillingness to challenge students. Once I realized I was losing them … the eye-rolls and the commentary … it felt like they were already deciding that my class would be a waste of time. I back pedaled. For all my talk about the importance of emotion, I did not stand my ground. I felt that if I continued to pursue this point --- pushing for clarification and hopefully helping them to see the narrowness of their stance --- my students would judge me as “too emotional.” My legitimacy as a teacher --- university professor --- would be in jeopardy. I did not want to lose them.

Fear of ‘being dismissed’ by her students played a significant role in the instructor’s retreat described above. Sue Campbell (1994) writes about the ways in which words such as bitter, sentimental, and emotional are used to characterize women and imply that they do not need to be taken seriously. According to Campbell (1994) and other feminist scholars, the fear of being labeled sentimental, emotional, or ‘bitter’ and therefore “dismissed,” makes it difficult for women to claim or express their emotions publicly. In this instance, the instructor feared being labeled ‘emotional’ by her students and therefore viewed as incompetent if she continued to suggest that emotional expression during discussion might be understood as anything but a problem. Despite her position of power in relation to her students, and her seeming awareness of the ways in which emotional rules must be challenged if we hope to enact change, the course instructor did not consistently challenge the construction of emotion as an individual, private problem. This hesitation and reluctance on the part of the instructor is suggestive of both the power of emotional rules and the collaborative nature of emotions. In this instance the instructor’s sensitivity to the ancient rule that emotion is not a serious subject but a private problem and that those who break this rule --- especially women --- are not to be ‘taken seriously’ dissuaded her from continuing to explore this issue with her students. Students’ resistance and reluctance to embrace or honor the instructor’s concern about the ways in which emotional expression was being dismissed, also informed the instructor’s retreat from this inquiry. Other people have what Campbell (1994) terms “considerable power” over how our emotions are interpreted, honored, or blocked. As interpreters of our emotional expression, other people can attempt to understand, recognize, and ‘uptake’ our emotions or they can judge, label, and dismiss our emotions. Though the instructor repeatedly expressed concern, or worry, about students’
overall disregard for emotional expression, not one student recognized, honored, or responded to this concern. Bodily gestures such as eye-rolling and verbal denials effectively blocked the instructor’s concern.

The dynamics of resistance and retreat exemplified in this first class discussion were a harbinger of things to come. As we explain in more detail below, most students continued to position emotion as an individual and private ‘problem’ and deny that emotion can play a constructive, rather than a destructive, role in discussion. For her part, the instructor continued to acquiesce to this resistance rather than challenging it.

Resistance and Retreat

Over the course of the semester, class discussions could be characterized as ‘lively.’ A majority of students participated each week, and journal entries revealed that class discussions helped students make connections between course readings and their experiences in local area middle schools. The instructor posed questions that enabled students to analyze readings and articulate their personal position on issues under discussion. She also was able to help students clarify their perspective by drawing upon course readings and their classroom experiences. While, in many ways these class discussions might be characterized as ‘effective,’ overall they failed to attend to affective dimensions of learning to facilitate discussion and communicate across difference. The patterns established in the first class discussion continued.

Each week, at some point during discussion, dialogue would become ‘heated.’ Despite students’ proclamations to the contrary - that emotional expression should not be part of class discussions - they frequently spoke with emotion. Frustration, exasperation, anger, concern, sympathy, humor, joy, and confusion were not sanitized from students’ speech but were intimately linked to perspectives shared and questions asked. Depending on who was speaking when the tenor of speech changed from detached and dispassionate to embodied and passionate, responses ranged from quiet discomfort, dismissal, sarcasm, and ‘gentle’ humorous heckling. As this shift occurred, the course instructor attempted to call students’ attention to both this change in dialogue and the ways in which emotional expression precipitated this shift. She asked students to consider why their speech became reactionary or defensive and prompted them to consider why they felt so strongly. She also attempted to highlight the ways in which class ‘rules’ for emotional expression did not apply equally to all speakers. When this line of inquiry met with hostility and indifference, the instructor quickly retreated, moving dialogue away from an examination of the affective dimensions of discussion. In doing so, emotional expression continued to be construed solely as destructive rather than as an entry point to develop deeper understanding of different perspectives on the issues being discussed. Below, we depict this dynamic in greater depth by describing this moment during one specific course meeting and discussion.

The weekly readings and discussion topic for the third week focus on teaching for social justice and more specifically, the responsibility of social studies educators to teach about and against all forms of oppression. The discussion format utilized was the Take A Stand model in which participants literally ‘take a stand’ to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with particular concepts, ideas, or practices. The instructor placed four signs --- one in each corner of the room --- reading Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Next, she read a statement and asked students to take a stand in the corner of the room that represented their position. Once students arrived in the selected corner, they were to work with other students who selected this position to articulate two or three most significant reasons for their choice. The instructor
moved from corner to corner, asking questions and facilitating these small group discussions. After groups identified their top two or three reasons, they were asked to share their reasons with the entire class. Students questioned different groups at this point and moved to another corner if their position changed.

During the above Take A Stand discussion, students were asked to consider the following statement and to move to the corner of the room that best represented their position: All educators --- and especially social studies educators --- have a moral responsibility to teach about and against racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. When students moved from small group discussions to whole class discussion, dialogue quickly became quite animated. At one point the group in the Strongly Disagree corner shared their number one reason for their disagreement. “This is parents’ responsibility. We can’t teach about this stuff. We don’t teach morals in school; that is done at home and in church.” The Strongly Disagree group included two White males --- Wayne and Larry --- and one African-American male, Darryl. Immediately after the group spokesperson completed the statement, other group members provided examples and support. Ebony, a student in the Strongly Agree corner challenged their reasoning by asking the following question, “Wait a minute … what if some parents teach their children to hate people of different races or religions or something like that?” Speaking with frustration, Ebony exclaimed, “I just don’t see how that is a valid reason.” Before the instructor could intervene to ask Ebony why she questioned the validity of the argument, Larry, a member of the Strongly Disagree group, replied to her query sarcastically ‘correcting’ Ebony by stating, “If you heard what I said you would understand.” Following this statement some students laughed and other students emitted a low “ohhhhhhh.” Here, the instructor asked everyone to pause for a minute and to think about the exchange they just witnessed. “What just happened here?” she asked the students. The overwhelming consensus was that ‘people had gotten emotional’ and in doing so had ‘ruined’ the discussion. When the instructor attempted to ask students to reconsider this emotion as destructive stance, arms were folded, discomfort and silence descended. Rather than providing adequate wait time and helping students process their discomfort, the instructor announced that the class would move on to the next statement and ‘start fresh.’

In their written reflections about this particular discussion, most students, 14 of the 17 participants, commented on this exchange. Some students noted that the instructor “did the right thing” by ending the dialogue about the first statement and moving on to another point. This reaction suggests a dislike, or aversion, to conflict and the messiness of emotions it often entails. Others commented that once “someone got emotional things went downhill.” What is interesting to note is that some comments like the one noted above were directed toward Ebony’s “emotional outburst,” while others focused exclusively on Larry’s use of sarcasm. Though willing to engage in this type of analysis in their journals, none of these students shared their perspectives publicly in class. These varied responses suggest students’ interpretation and understanding of the so-called ‘rules’ for emotion varied considerably. For some, Ebony’s emotional challenge of the Strongly Agree group’s reasoning was inappropriate and, for others, Larry’s emotional reaction to Ebony’s question was problematic. While these reactions were not strictly divided by gender or race, four of the seven students who criticized Ebony were male and all of them were White. Though the instructor attempted to make these ‘rules’ and varied interpretations explicit, she did not belabor the point. In her journal she expressed frustration with students’ resistance and her own unwillingness to pursue this inquiry in spite of this resistance.
I wanted to ask students – why is it ‘okay’ for Larry to use sarcasm but not ‘okay’ for Ebony to express frustration? Or vice versa? How might paying attention to emotions such as frustration and anger help us understand different perspectives on this issue? What can we learn from individuals’ emotional expressions that we might not learn otherwise? Instead I asked a vague question --- what happened here? --- Allowing them to continue to ignore or side-step this type of analysis. By not asking these questions, what emotional rules am I modeling? Why am I not pursuing this line of thinking and questioning more aggressively in this class with these students? What am I afraid of? Rejection. Bad course evaluations. That dead look in students’ eyes when they have checked out.

The dynamics of this discussion, and each weekly discussion thereafter, reaffirmed the pattern established during the first class meeting. Traditional conceptualizations of emotion as private and problematic continued to dominate and unspoken yet powerful ‘rules’ for emotional expression also were evident in these patterns of resistance and retreat.

The majority of students, male and female, White and African-American, positioned themselves in the emotion as within the private problem camp. Wayne and Larry, however, were the most committed and vocal about this issue. Ebony and the course instructor, one African-American and one White female, were the only participants who publicly questioned, challenged, and sometimes outright rejected this stance. Cathy, the one Asian-American student in the class, never commented either in class or in her journal on this tension. Throughout the semester some expressions of anger or frustration were not only tolerated but also accepted, while others were characterized as problematic and illegitimate. Larry and Wayne, for example, often expressed hostility and exasperation but were not the targets of sarcasm or humor as a result. Ebony, on other hand, was chastised for ‘raising her voice’ and ‘getting emotional’ and she was not alone. Overall, if a female student ‘lapsed’ and spoke with concern, anger, or frustration during class discussions their concerns, ideas, and questions tended to be ridiculed, ignored, or dismissed, while the same emotional rule did not apply to male students. Finally, the course instructor – despite her position of power in relation to her students – felt compelled to limit her efforts to analyze these dynamics; fearing that her authority and perhaps her ‘stature’ as an instructor would be compromised if she spent too long focusing on feelings.

Discussion and Implications

In our analysis of the discussions facilitated by the first author with the pre-service teachers enrolled in her middle grades social studies methods course, we note three significant patterns. First, emotion --- whether acknowledged, honored, ignored, dismissed, or ridiculed --- is a part of classroom-based discussions. Despite pre-service teachers’ protests to the contrary, that emotional expression should not be part of classroom discussions, strong emotions were a part of their contributions to class dialogue. When the course instructor attempted to bring attention to the role of emotion in pre-service teachers’ discussions about contentious issues in social studies education, most participants resisted or rejected these efforts. This resistance highlights a second significant pattern, the resiliency and strength of traditional conceptualizations of emotion as a private, individual problem and as something to be controlled. While the course instructor utilized a question-posing approach to challenge pre-service teachers to reconsider the ways in which emotion was being positioned within the context of their discussions, she did not specifically identify students’ conceptualizations of emotion as a topic of inquiry. Without explicitly naming and analyzing the prevalence and strength of traditional conceptualizations of emotion, each attempt by the course instruc-
tor to explore the role of emotion in discussion ended in failure; a third significant pattern.

As findings from this initial self-study suggest, emotions are part of the ways in which we think about and engage in discussion with others. We cannot outlaw emotions in our classrooms. Given this reality, social studies educators must choose how they will respond. They can choose to ignore, dismiss, or attempt to nullify the role of emotion in classroom-based discussions. The strength and prevalence of traditional conceptualizations of emotion as a private and individual problem suggest that this might be the easiest and safest choice. While safe and easy, this approach also can discredit certain modes of expression, silence particular individuals and/or social groups, reaffirm existing social hierarchies, and impede dialogue rather than foster it.

Social studies educators also can choose to engage in inquiry with their students about the ways in which attending to emotion can deepen our understanding of diverse perspectives. This approach depends upon our ability to view emotion as a resource rather than as a problem. The stalled efforts of the first author to engage pre-service teachers in this type of inquiry, demonstrate this is not an easy task. The question-posing approach utilized yielded limited results. Resistance to this approach suggests that pre-service teachers needed to first consider the role of emotion in listening to other’s perspectives in a different context before examining their own discussions with a critical eye. Pre-service teachers need to be provided with opportunities to consider the ways in which emotion is not simply an individual experience, but socially and politically constructed. Initial inquiries into the politics of emotion might begin by viewing video of contentious discussions among school board members or school faculty, as well as K-12 classroom-based discussions. Social studies teacher educators then can facilitate an analysis of the ways in which ‘following the affect’ deepens our understanding of diverse perspectives, as well as explore how ‘rules’ for emotional expression vary across different contexts and communities.

We began by asking readers to consider the emotional work of learning to communicate across difference, and the importance of this work in a democracy. Like scholars Megan Boler and Iris Marion Young, we argue that this work is essential practice for citizens in a multicultural democracy. The findings from this first study suggest that we need to explicitly attend to and challenge traditional constructions of emotion as an individual private problem or experience. If we do not engage in this type of work, it will be difficult to understand the role of emotion in learning to listen to others’ perspectives and critically examine our own beliefs and assumptions.

Drawing on Young’s (2000) work and reflecting on the findings from this first study, we argue that it is vital for social studies educators to attend to the affective dynamics of discussion. Traditional conceptualizations of emotion as private, childish, and even dangerous, continue to hold sway. As a result, expressions of anger, frustration, or passionate concern continued to be viewed with suspicion. One consequence of this stance is that certain modes of expression are discredited and people are silenced. If we allow emotion to be ignored, dismissed, or ‘outlawed’ in classroom discussion we are only contributing to this silencing.

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