Dialogue, Discussion, and Democracy in the Social Studies Classroom

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This paper seeks to intertwine current literature in social studies education with practical suggestions for integrating dialogue and controversy into the practicing teacher’s classroom. The works of John Dewey (1926), Diana Hess (2004), and Walter Parker (2003) will serve as the foundation of this essay; placing an emphasis on their respective arguments advocating for the school as a place where students learn to develop the ability to participate in informed dialogue and understand the foundational elements of a functional democracy. The essay will place emphasis on the necessity for teachers who incorporate controversial social issues into their lessons through various forms of discourse. To that end, a foundational analysis of the benefits of integrating controversial issues into the social studies classroom will be provided and followed by a description of four practical lessons that have effectively fostered dialogue amongst students at the secondary level. The aim of the paper, ultimately, is to provide practicing social studies teachers at the middle and high school level with feasible lessons that are grounded in the theories and philosophies of the leading scholars in social studies education.

Keywords: democratic education, controversial issues, social studies education, dialogue, debate, civic education, diversity

Introduction
Recent decades have produced an extensive body of literature describing the necessity for developing students who are prepared to both enter into and further our democratic society (Hess, 2002/2004; Parker, 2005; Ross & Marker, 2005). Such authorship is often grounded in John Dewey’s (1926) vision of the classroom as a miniature community in which students participate in a setting reflective of a functional democratic society (Kliebard, 2004). As such, society often expects the American school system to foster student growth on matters regarding contemporary social and political issues (Moore, 2012; Parker, 2012). Such aims are reflected specifically in the social studies where the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)—the leading organization in the field—has placed strong emphasis on such goals in their oft-referenced strands, which detail the organization’s objectives for the social studies (2010). Though NCSS’s objectives are broadly outlined and in no way prescriptive of what “good” pedagogy entails, they often mirror the epistemologies put forth by Dewey and Walter Parker in that they “promot[e] civic competence—the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010, para. 1).

The underlining theme regarding the development of informed and active citizens is prevalent throughout the literature in social studies education. Schools have been seen as partially responsible for quelling the many societal issues dating as far back as the early 19th century when Thomas Jefferson first advocated for universal education to avoid the development
of another tyrannical government. Further, Jefferson argued for a form of civic education meant to prepare future generations for the tasks of: maintaining individual freedoms, improving society, and finding solutions to problems of the day (Kliebard, 2004; Youngberg, 2008). Though written over 200 years after Jefferson (1779) made such claims in “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge,” Parker (2012) describes the problems Jefferson detailed as “not ‘mine’ or ‘yours’ but ‘ours’” in the sense that they are public problems (p. 5). With this, both Jefferson and Parker claim schools must foster an environment leading to students who are informed of their role as citizens and capable of contributing to the growth of society.

If the school is the ideal location for future generations to develop these abilities, however, educators must be prepared to integrate relatively controversial topics into their classroom in an attempt to expose students to both the democratic process as well as the issues citizens often debate after having completed their formal education (Parker, 2012). The integration of such issues into the social studies classroom has been written about extensively in the field of education (Barton & McCully, 2007). Such literature has remained relatively positive as scholars have continuously noted the use of controversial issues and contemporary points of contention in the classroom has a number of benefits which, when implemented effectively, will help teachers achieve the aims of social studies education (Cuenca, 2010; Hess, 2004).

For starters, academia has credited the use of controversy in the classroom with the elimination of idiocy; the increasing likelihood for student-engagement; and the development of autonomous students who think critically (Hess, 2002; Parker, 2005). In addition to these outcomes, Keith Barton and Alan McCully (2007) note students who participate in controversial issues are more likely to vote in elections, follow political news, take part in discussions on politics, have confidence in their views and develop an interest in processes of a democratic society. Similarly, teachers who integrate issues into a classroom where students have a number of perspectives developed from a variety of backgrounds and experiences are said to provide their students with more opportunities for learning both about and from one another and develop the ability to interact and participate in dialogue and discourse in a more open-minded and intellectual manner (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007; Moore, 2012; Parker, 2012). In this sense, dialogue and discourse allow students to learn not only about the foundations of other students’ cultures and beliefs, but to live in a pluralist society where they are both accepting and educated about the increasing diversity in America’s society.

Emphasis must be placed on the role of a discursive education in developing students who are both understanding of the democratic process and willing to both listen to and learn from others whose views may differ from their own. As Diana Hess (2004) has frequently demonstrated in her work, the use of controversy often is contingent on students’ abilities to participate in discussions with one another. The student-centered education often advocated for in academia is to be grounded in a setting where the material is not simply worked on by the students, but in a manner where students are inquiring, discovering, and learning with and from one another. Such positive traits of a classroom closely reflect the aforementioned views and aims of Dewey and Jefferson who extensively noted the objectives of the school should be grounded in the interest of society and its constant renewal and improvement. As such, having students work through issues and discover solutions through discussion reflects the “miniature community” approach to teaching.
Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice

A fundamental question needs to be asked at this point: if the research using discourse and controversy in the classroom is so overwhelmingly positive, why do so few teachers appear to integrate lessons which involve some form of controversy or encourage students to discuss open-ended issues? The gap between the research and the practice of teaching is clearly a cause for concern since what scholars are advocating for is rarely being practiced in the classroom (Barton & McCully, 2007; Cuenca, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Hess, 2002). In an analysis of 48 high school classrooms, Martin Nystrand, Adam Gamoran and William Carbonara (1998), found over 62% of the classrooms studied spent less than 30 seconds per class period on discussion (Hess, 2002). Further, those who included discussion often involved only a small portion of the class and were relatively superficial in nature (Nystrand et al., 1998). The discussions only surfaced the basic elements of the content, and there appeared limited critical thinking by the students in the classrooms. Despite the majority of social studies teachers acknowledging the importance of both a democratic conception of education and the use of controversy and dialogue amongst their students, there exists a discrepancy between practice and beliefs (Oulton et al., 2004). As found by Christopher Oulton et al., social studies teachers state the purposes of integrating controversial issues and discussion into the classroom include the improvement of “pupils’ knowledge, analytical skills, study skills, behaviour, attitudes and values [sic]” (p. 502). With this, the teachers detailed and analyzed by Oulton’s work all stressed interest and placed value in the teaching of social issues through discussion in the social studies classroom. Their implementation of such practices, however, was minimal.

So the question remains: why is a practice, often advocated for in academia and agreed upon as beneficial by classroom teachers, so rarely applied in the actual secondary classroom? On the most fundamental level, many practicing teachers fear how their students may respond to a lesson or activity founded on students conversing among one another (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007). As is the case with both novice and veteran teachers, classroom management is a primary concern, thus the integration of a lesson having the potential to jeopardize the control of the classroom often is intimidating to classroom teachers, especially new teachers to the field who fear the practical aspects of classroom management (Allen, 2010). In this sense, many secondary teachers note their students have yet to be trained on how to participate in discussions without personally attacking other students or making the content either offensive or inaccurate (Ashman & Gillies, 1997). Teachers, as such, fear the classroom environment may become uncontrollable when the lesson deviates from the traditional lecture and note-taking, teaching-centered approach.

Many teachers, further, hesitate to integrate topics of contention “can generate passionate debates, bitter disagreements, anger, and hostility among students because their opposing political views reflect their deeply held moral values and beliefs about what constitutes moral behavior and just laws and policies” (Moore, 2012, p. 142). This is understandably so. As Gordon Allport notes in his prolific work The Nature of Prejudice (1954), by the age of 10 (i.e., third or fourth grade), most students have already selected an in-group to be a part of based on commonalities. Further, by middle and high school, many of these students’ dispositions and beliefs are firmly rooted in almost a decades’ worth of conversations and experiences with like-minded peers. If students are not trained in the art of dialogue and discourse with those who
have conflicting views as them, it is easy to imagine how teachers may be hesitant to integrate controversial issues and interactive activities into their classrooms for fear of what may occur.

Despite such fears, the argument can and should still be made for schools’ use of the diversity of their student populations to educate and inform students on the beliefs and backgrounds of others in an attempt to create better citizens and, thus, improve society. Parker (2012) notes schools are the best place for students to be exposed to one another’s diversity, as they are public institutions capable of providing a truly democratic education to students. Further, Parker emphasizes the schools and their diversity “can be mobilized as a resource for democratic education, and in doing so is key to a strong democratic education that goes beyond rote learning” (p. 5). These aims are both essential to an effective educational experience and often suggested to be met through the use of student-engagement in interactive and educated dialogue and debate.

**Practical Means for Fostering Discussion**

On account of the aims of education and the sentiments of practicing teachers, the purpose of the remainder of the essay will be to detail four practical examples of lessons that have worked to facilitate discussion and integrate open-ended (and often controversial) topics into both middle and high school level social studies classrooms. The lessons provided are grounded in both the general theories and aims of education (see Dewey, 1933; Hess, 2004; Parker, 2005/2012) and, more specifically, the aims of social studies education. They, however, were developed in an attempt to provide the practicing teacher with realistic means for fostering discourse amongst students.

Each of these lessons has successfully been implemented into the social studies classroom in middle and high school settings as well at the university level. Though, like most progressive lessons and activities, the methods to be presented have been developed through extensive trial-and-error. They now serve as a strong way to integrate discussion into the social studies classroom and turn the classroom into a miniature community. Further, as each group of students is different and each teacher has various means for constructing their lessons, the provided ideas can and should be tailored to the distinct personality of each classroom to be the most effective for students. Much like achieving the aims of education, there is no prescriptive strategy or “one size fits all” method. As such, the provided lessons should serve solely as guidelines for practicing teachers.

**The Silent Compendious Journal**

The Silent Compendious Journal was developed in an attempt to combat teachers’ fears and provide students and teachers with a forum for discussing their ideas among one another in a manner likely to prepare them for oral and spontaneous debates with other members of the classroom and, later, society. The premise for this activity is grounded in the belief that students must communicate with one another regarding a number of issues in society. The purpose, however, is to have students communicate with one another through mediums other than oral expression. With this, the teacher is encouraged to have students interacting and learning about one another’s perspectives by arguing silently. The lesson begins with students learning about a topic of contention through either their own research or a brief presentation by the teacher. Students are both encouraged and expected to learn as much about the topic as they can while formulating an opinion on the matter.
After ample time has been provided for students to develop a strong foundation for the material, students are placed in pairs. Once settled, students are given a card indicating whether they are the first or second partner in the set. Unbeknownst to them, the students will be arguing one of the two sides on the topic they have been researching. For instance, if students were learning about Truman’s decisions to drop the atomic bomb on both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they will be told what side they are arguing for based on the number they are assigned. The two students paired together ultimately will be given contrasting angles to argue. In this case, the first partner may be expected to make the case that the dropping of the bombs was just and necessary regardless of if they felt World War II could have been ended through a number of more peaceful ways. The second partner, similarly, may be asked to argue the dropping of the bomb was unnecessary even if they supported Truman’s decision.

Once students are made aware of what they are to be arguing, they are provided with a handout (see Table 1) in which they must silently write for three minutes about their position. As they do this, their partner will formulate their argument using the research they have collected and the new knowledge they have regarding the side they will be arguing. Once the initial three minutes has ended, the first student passes their argument to the partner who then has three to four minutes to respond on paper. Similar to the first round, the partner not arguing has three minutes to review their notes and develop a counterargument based on the material and data they have collected in their inquiries and their expectations for how they feel their partner will respond.

Table 1
The Silent Compendious Journal Activity

Partner One: ______________________________ Partner Two ____________________

Topic _____________________________

Partner 1’s Opening Statement:

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Partner 2’s Response:
Partner 1’s Rebuttal:

This process continues for four rounds (lasting an estimated 15-20 minutes). During this time, students are collaborating with one another, discussing a point of contention, practicing their persuasive writing skills, and learning how to argue a position they may not necessarily support. The Silent, Compendious Journal provides students with all of the aims of a democratic education, but does so through written expression instead of oral defenses. Because of this rationale, such a lesson is often less daunting for teachers who are fearful of what may happen if dialogue becomes too heated amongst students.

**Silent and Anonymous Discussion**

Much like with The Silent Compendious Journal, students must have a foundation for the content prior to engaging in this lesson. An “information sheet” is often presented to students to serve as a guideline for their research (See Table 2). Once this base has been established, an open-ended prompt question regarding the issue is either read aloud or put on the board. Students then respond to the question anonymously on their sheet of paper. The teacher should provide students with a rubric for their response emphasizing the need for their writing to be evidence-based, rational, and relevant. While writing these essays, the teacher also provides students with identification numbers only the teacher and the student know. The student is asked to write this number on the top of the paper for identification purposes (both in the activity and for grading).
After students have had an ample amount of time to write their initial essays, they submit their work to the teacher who then passes out the essays randomly. Once the students have received one of their classmates’ essays, they then respond in an equally educated argument on the same sheet of paper (this typically occurs for 10 minutes). Such responses must be evidenced-based and provide either a counter-argument toward the author or agree and expand on the original essay. After these 10 minutes have concluded, students then write their number for identification purposes on the paper and turn the paper back into the teacher. Finally, the teacher will pass back the essays to the original author who will now have feedback on their content from one of their peers who either provide a different perspective or expand on the original argument.

Table 2
Student Preparation Sheet

Name ________________________ Date _______________

Preparation Work Completed: __________________________(TEACHER SIGNATURE)

Directions: Please complete the following prompts. If a fact you have written down is used in discussion, mark it out with your pen or pencil.

Write down THREE concrete, quantitative facts you could use in your argument

1.

2.

3.

*Quantitative: Dealing with numbers or statistics. “45% of the voters claimed that they agreed with Joe’s policies”

Write down Three qualitative facts you could use in your arguments

1.

2.
3.

*Qualitative: Facts that are supported by empirical data done through research and observation. “Controversial Issues are a great way to engage your students in discussion-based topics”

List three general facts from the reading that you DO NOT agree with and want to argue against:

1.

2.

3.

List three sources you used (Please refrain from citing Google or Wikipedia)

1.

2.

3.

Doing such an activity anonymously allows students to share their views on an issue (in a manner supported by logic and reason) while not fearing the critical views of their peers. When activities are anonymous, students often are more willing to express opinions and receive feedback, as they know whoever is reading their work cannot identify the author; nor can they identify their reviewer. Similarly, providing students with ample time to formulate arguments and develop clear and concise persuasive ideas provides interdisciplinary opportunities between the social studies and English and language arts.

**The Reporter’s Interview**

Similar to the aforementioned lessons, “The Reporters Interview” is contingent on students having a working understanding of the content prior to effectively engaging in this activity. Unlike those lessons, however, this activity seeks to have students learn from one another through a formal discussion presented as an interview. With this, students are more likely to take on a “professional” manner, as they have seen news reporters on television carry themselves in both unbiased and formal settings. Students tend to take on the personality of a professional reporter who works to maintain classroom management. Despite this structured setting, however, students still engage in discussion while learning both about one another’s dispositions and beliefs.

This lesson begins with presenting a controversial issue to students. This could be a lesson centering on politics, community, school issues, or one of the many other social studies issues from either the past or present that is open-ended in nature. After said topic is chosen,
students research it looking for important themes and ideas to sway their own views and correct any misconceptions. Students then draft reporter-type questions (e.g., “How do you feel about this?”, “why do you feel this way?”, “What would make you feel differently?”). Next, the educators presents students with examples of good or professional reporting, which tends to be beneficial in the next portion of the lesson where students are participating in structured discourse with one another. Providing students with brief simulations or in-class examples prior to the lesson tends to further demonstrate both the educator’s expectations and what an effective interview looks like.

Once the aims and expectations for the lesson have been presented, students are paired and asked to “interview” one another regarding both the content and how the student’s views toward the content were developed based on personal beliefs and experiences. While the interviews are occurring, the reporter makes note of key ideas and comments by the individual being interviewed. As this is taking place, the teacher walks around maintaining the positive climate of the classroom while simultaneously assisting students with their interviews. Such interviews tend to occur for 10 to 15 minutes. Once the initial interviews are conducted, students are expected to change positions and the individual originally interviewed will take the role of the reporter.

After the interviews have occurred, students sit down and reflect on their conversations through a number of lenses ranging from the content to the background of whomever they interviewed. Students are asked to: contemplate their own views; ponder how those views differ from their partner; and question why these differences may exist. While this may lesson may be formally structured differently than how many might envision classroom discourse, it provides educators with a more realistic and safe setting for students to learn from one another, discuss their differences, and practice engaging in a formal discussion. This lesson, therefore, provides students with the opportunity to learn about one another while participating in formal dialogue. Depending on the topic being discussed, students can further understand the perspectives of others and how these may differ from their own.

‘Convincing the Undecided’: An Expanded Version

After students have developed the ability to use evidence-based logical and reasoning to discuss controversial issues with one another, ‘Convincing the Undecided’ works to foster student-engagement, teamwork, and the incorporation of a number of views in the classroom. While this lesson is clearly the most difficult of the set, it presents the most potential benefits. At its foundation, students are presented with a topic that will serve as the basis for a classroom discussion in which they are placed in teams based on their beliefs and knowledge of an issue. Students, for instance, research an open-ended topic such as the use of the phrase “Under God” in the pledge of allegiance. After having researched the topic, formulated an opinion, and compiled an array of supportive data, students are instructed to move to one side of the classroom if they have one belief and the other side of the classroom if they are on the other end of the spectrum. If, however, they are unable to make up their mind, they will sit in the middle of the classroom and be the “undecided” whose support the other students try to win.

Once the students have placed themselves in the appropriate area of the classroom, the two groups who have “formed” an opinion on the matter take turns formulating arguments and sharing them with the class. This can be done either through individual comments or by having groups formulate arguments as a whole. For every student in the middle (the “undecided” group)
who joins their side, the group gets one point, or score, in the argument. Similarly, for every student from the other side who reverses his or her opinion, two points are rewarded to the side receiving a participant. This process is continued several times over, as the groups reset themselves based on each question. As multiple questions are asked, students collect points throughout the various rounds. In the end, the student with the highest amount of points is considered the winning debater of the day.

The idea for this lesson, ultimately, is to create dialogue in an engaging and competitive manner supported with evidence-based logic and reasoning. Having students work both with and against one another allows them to participate in dialogue with both friends and peers who they are less likely to hear from in class. It allows for multiple perspectives to be presented to the class in an organized and semi-structured manner. The classroom is serving as a community in the sense that teachers are setting up a forum where students are listening to and learning from their peers through evidence-based dialogue.

**Conclusion**

Shaping students into autonomous citizens prepared to both enter into and foster growth in society is neither a new idea nor an ephemeral trend meant to serve as a panacea to the issues facing the country. Democratic education, rather, has been advocated for and written about for well over a century (Kliebard, 2004). It is essential for teachers to incorporate the literature produced by leading scholars into their practices in the secondary social studies classroom. Educators must have access to journals and other texts and forums to communicate with one another about best practices in education (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2004). Additionally, teachers must have a proper understanding of such texts and be able to fit the content into their pedagogical practices. Teachers must have support by their students’ parents, administrators, and peers. For this to happen, academics and practicing teachers and administrators alike must communicate with one another and build cohesive strategies for integrating the theoretical with the practical. As such, other teachers are encouraged to submit their successful lessons and ground them in the theory that underlines the field of education.

**References**


**Author’s Bio**

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