Strategically Organic: One U.S. History Teacher’s Experience With Class Discussion

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Effective discussion is inextricably linked to democracy. Social studies curriculum and instruction should engage students in practicing democratic skills and habits of mind. This case study provides a microanalysis of one U.S. History teacher’s commitment to fostering discussion in her classroom as a theorized pedagogical practice. A better understanding of what motivates teachers to engage students in classroom discussions paralleled with rich descriptions of how this teacher plans and implements discussion could encourage others to try this approach to teaching and learning.

*Keywords:* classroom discussion, student-centered learning, U.S. History teaching, lesson planning, primary sources, authentic intellectual work,

Effective discussion is inextricably linked to democracy. “In revealing and celebrating the multiplicity of perspectives possible, discussion at its best exemplifies the democratic process” (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 3). In the United States, there is a longstanding vision of schooling for civic education and democratic participation. In one of his many letters, Thomas Jefferson wrote:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. (Jefferson & Ford, 1892, p. 161)

The civic rationale remains the foundation of social studies education, preparing students for the office of citizen in a democratic society (National Council for the Social Studies, 2008). New social studies guidelines for effective social studies teaching highlight civics as one of three foundational goals, along with college and career. The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards calls for:

- active and responsible citizens [to] identify and analyze public problems; deliberate with other people about how to define and address issues; take constructive, collaborative action; reflect on their actions; create and sustain groups; and influence institutions both large and small. (National Council for Social Studies, 2013)

Social studies curriculum and instruction should engage students in practicing those skills and habits of mind necessary for effective citizenship (Dewey, 1916). As argued by Walter Parker...
(2008), democratic citizenship demands both student learning about democracy and participating in democracy.

Discussion as contended by Walter Parker and Diana Hess (2001) is both an instructional strategy and an end product of social studies education wherein students may enhance their content knowledge and increase their abilities to engage in discussion. Teaching for and with discussion provides authenticity to the social studies curriculum, offering teachers a vehicle to prepare young people to participate in a form of civic engagement that exists beyond the confines of the school (Newmann, Marks & Gamoran, 1996). We, therefore, focus on highly “disciplined and concerted talk” (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005 p. 5), as opposed to classroom conversation, which Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill define as aimless, carefree, and effortless.

An essential factor in determining how students learn to conduct effective public issues discussions is the “quality of a teacher’s practice” (Hess, 2009, p. 53). In order to examine and better understand the theorized practice of discussion in a classroom setting, this case study investigates one U.S. History teacher’s commitment to teach, “intentionally for and with discussion” (Hess, 2009, p. 55). This study addresses the following research questions:
1. What motivates this teacher to engage students in classroom discussions?
2. How does she plan and implement discussion in her classroom?

Theoretical Framework
Why Teach With And For Discussion?
The benefits of effective classroom discussions extend beyond theories of democratic education for citizenship-related student learning. Increased content knowledge, listening skills, collaborative learning, debate and deliberation, and critical thinking are all valued outcomes of effective classroom discussions (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Within the report, The Civic Mission of Schools, is the suggestion schools develop competent and responsible citizens when they “incorporate discussions of current local, national and international issues and events in the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives” (Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2003, p. 8). Students, thus, experience increased political interest and civic knowledge, improve critical thinking and communication; they are more willing to discuss public affairs outside the classroom (Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2003). Research demonstrates relationships between discussions and the promotion of democratic values such as tolerance, deliberation, and citizenship (Avery, 2010; Avery, Bird, Johnstone, Sullivan & Thalhammer, 1992; Parker, 2001, 2006; Parker & Hess, 2001). Though social studies scholars consistently tout the benefits of using discussion in the classroom, Diana Hess (2009) acknowledges the data on which social studies research currently draws is inadequate and some of the findings are contradictory. While many civic educators promote the inclusion of issues discussion in the school curriculum, there is much to learn about how teachers and students experience discussions and how teachers can facilitate and maximize the benefits of discussion (Hess, 2009).

What Is An Effective Discussion?
Not all discussions are effective. Significant research suggests the “persistence of recitation under the guise of discussion” (Larson, 1999, p. 125). In order to be effective at
achieving the theoretical, educational, and motivational benefits of discussions, teachers may require students to: gather evidence and construct knowledge about issues, conduct disciplined inquiry, interrogate multiple perspectives, and present opinions based on the information and the available options (Hess, 2009). High levels of substantive conversation, per Fred Newmann and colleagues, occur only when there is considerable interaction about the topic. This is demonstrated as students make distinctions and raise questions, not as they report facts and experiences (Newmann, Marks & Gamoran, 1996). Discussions, in this sense, must not be scripted or controlled (as with teacher-led recitation), and students should be encouraged to initiate explanations and questions as well as respond directly to comments of previous speakers (Newmann, Marks & Gamoran, 1996). Seven characteristics of effective discussion, as discussed in Hess (2010) include: (1) focus on an interpretable text, issue, idea, etc.; (2) students and teachers are prepared; (3) most of the talk comes from the students rather than the teacher; (4) there is adequate time spent on one topic before moving on to another; (5) participants feel comfortable; (6) many people talk; and (7) students and teachers ask authentic questions and refer back to points made during the discussion (p. 210).

**Prevalence of Effective Discussions**

The rigorous standards effective discussions must meet may lead to doubts of relevance in classrooms. Despite the promise of discussions to foster what Parker (2008) calls *enlightened political engagement*, or, “wise participation in public affairs” (p. 33). Research findings on the prevalence and effective use of discussions are mixed. Large-scale observational studies of middle and high school students report limited to no classroom discussion (Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith & Thiede, 2000; Nystrand, Gamoran & Carbonaro, 1998). In observing 106 middle and high school social studies classes 90% percent involved no discussion at all (Nystrand, Gamoran & Carbonaro, 1998). In the 10% of classrooms demonstrating discussion, the average length of discussion was 42 seconds for eighth grade classes and 31 seconds for ninth grade classes (Nystrand, Gamoran & Carbonaro, 1998).

**Why Do Discussions Fail?**

Given the complexity of effective classroom discussion, it is not surprising research reveals a general absence of deliberative discussions in social studies classrooms. Understanding what motivates teachers to pursue or to abandon discussion is critical for furthering the practice of discussions in social studies classrooms. One reason for this absence is teachers tend to talk too much (Hess, 2010). *Apprenticeship of observation*, when teachers rely on their years of previous experience in schools as students and often return to methods by which they were taught rather than using newer pedagogical approaches may also be to blame for limited discussion (Lortie, 1975/2002). Other reasons include: potential pressures to cover reams of content with limited time to meet the demands of standardized testing, and use of teacher talk, when teachers dominate the classroom discourse, to maintain classroom control. Discussions may also fail when teachers ask inauthentic questions with singular answers. An example of this is found in Thomas Roby’s (1988) “Quiz Show” quasi-discussion (p. 189). In this study, the quality of classroom discussions was directly linked to the types of questions the teacher or students asked. When student contributions are weak or superficial, teachers can quickly lose heart with classroom discussions (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Teachers, who often lack sufficient models of effective discussions, lack the knowledge or experience to scaffold effective discussions. Those who do not appreciate the value or worth of discussions, moreover, are unlikely to teach with or for discussion (Henning, Nielsen, Henning & Schulz, 2008).
There are many reasons factoring into teachers’ decisions to foster or avoid classroom discussion. Some teachers, for example, view classroom diversity (cultural background, ethnicity, gender, race, learning styles and ability) as both an asset and a detriment to effective discussion (Larson, 1999). While some teachers appreciate the benefits of diversity for establishing multiple perspectives on issues, they may fear the conflicts that might arise during discussions (Larson, 1999). When teachers believed students were respectful of one another, they were more likely to use discussion. Teachers also report students do not always value discussion, preferring silent activities (Larson, 1999) and “Some students back out completely...they feel they are shut down and shut out of the system” (Larson, 1999, p. 127). The maturity levels of students and students’ interest levels in the discussion topic were also key factors when deciding whether to engage the students in discussions (Larson, 1999). When students were thought to be too immature, uninterested, or unable to handle class discussions, teachers often resorted to a teaching style similar to defensive teaching (McNeil, 2000), or the simplification of content and the reduction of demands on the students. While teachers’ perceptions of their students can influence if and how teachers use discussion, Brookfield and Preskill (2005) found student perceptions of discussions was also influential. “When discussions become games in which students try to guess what kinds of comments will earn the teacher’s approval, the conversation is stilted and hesitant” (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 38). Some students, unsure of the ground rules for discussion or the evaluation processes, will say something quickly to ensure participation, or they will spend so much time preparing that they miss their window of opportunity to contribute (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

In her study of 9th grade honors World Studies, Nora Flynn (2009) found young people are keenly aware of the dynamics of class discussion: “how their peers perceive them most often influences participation in class discussion” (p. 11). It is further noted students worry their participation will “reveal that they do not fully understand the content” (Flynn, 2009, p. 11); thus, they recognize being well versed in the content is integral to having effective discussions. Student interest was essential for stimulating a discussion; specifically, students were interested in discussing what was real. “If fostering skills in students to effectively participate in a democracy is an objective of using classroom discussion, students should have the opportunity to put their skills toward an important and real practice.” (Flynn, 2009, p. 12)

Despite the value social studies educators place on discussion, effective classroom discussion remains elusive. As conceded by James Dillon (1994), “Discussion is difficult. Far from coming naturally, it has to be learned.... Discussion is time-consuming, kaleidoscopically unpredictable in process, and uncertain of outcome as much as unsure of success...” (p. 105). Teaching inservice and preservice teachers explicitly about teaching with and for discussion could promote its effective use in the classroom. A tripartite approach, to include explicit instruction, participation, and reflection, is recommended in Parker and Hess (2001).

“A planned classroom discussion in a K-12 setting is an extraordinary event. Recitation is the norm; discussion is the exception” (Grossman, 2011, p. 28). Teachers, who are not yet convinced that discussions are worthwhile, can experience models of effective and ineffective discussions. Practicing facilitating discussions and exploring a variety of discussion formats will assist teachers in becoming skilled at asking genuine questions and selecting and interrogating appropriate texts with students. Classroom discussion requires establishing ground rules and classroom community, then encouraging silent students to talk and vocal students to listen (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Brookfield and Preskill (2005) remind us, “Good discussions
don’t just happen. They are partly the result of thoughtful planning, consistent modeling by the teacher, and respectful consideration of the experiences of students” (p. 62).

Method

This single-case study seeks a more thorough understanding of one exemplary U.S. History teacher’s experience with effective discussion in the classroom; how she plans, fosters, and implements effective discussions with her high school juniors. The qualitative data were collected as an extension of a national social studies research collaborative, known as the Social Studies Research Inquiry Collaborative (SSIRC) (Saye et al., 2013), which investigated authentic intellectual work within the social studies. The SSIRC team sought examples of authentic intellectual work (AIW) and measured the degree of authentic pedagogy (higher order thinking, deep knowledge (concerning the central ideas crucial to a topic or discipline), substantive conversation, and connectedness to the real world) that occurs in social studies classrooms (Saye et al., 2013). To evaluate the presence of AIW, researchers used standards developed by Newmann and colleagues (Newmann, 1996; Newmann, King & Carmichael, 2007; Newmann, Marks & Gamoran, 1996; Scheurman & Newmann, 1998).

In the SSIRC study, Saye, et al. (2013) found that high levels of authentic pedagogy were rare, only 21% of students in study classrooms experienced AIW. The average AIW composite teacher score was 15.29 (range of 7 to 23.99). No teachers were assessed in the first quartile, which required an AIW composite teacher score of 24 or higher. The second quartile consisted of moderately challenging teaching, with scores between 18 and 23.99. In the context of the study, working in the second quartile was a significant accomplishment (Saye et al.). Of the 52 teachers included in the statistical analysis, only 11 were evaluated at the second quartile of success in attaining AIW in their classrooms (Saye et al.).

Ms. Reynolds’ (pseudonym) AIW scores were among those 11 engaged in moderately challenging teaching in part by positioning herself as a facilitator of substantive conversation in the form of rigorous discussion in her U.S. history classes. Ms. Reynolds’ scores prompted further qualitative study of strategies in substantive conversation in the form of effective class discussion. According to AIW standards, substantive conversation demands multiple, sustained interactions between two or more participants. Scoring guidelines for the substantive conversation domain included key components such as considerable reciprocal exchanges (teacher to students and student to student) on a substantive (content oriented) topic. Exchanges consisted of three or more consecutive interchanges, and the dialogue built to attain a shared exploration and understanding of the topic (Saye et al., 2013).

The study was situated at a large Blue Ribbon (2014) suburban high school in the southeastern United States in two 11th grade U.S. Honors History classes. Demographics included primarily White students with a few Black and Asian students from the middle to high socioeconomic status; also present was a balance of gender. Ms. Reynolds is an experienced and highly qualified teacher with seven years teaching experience. She holds an undergraduate degree in history from a small liberal arts college and a master degree in Social Studies Education from a public university. Her professional development activities included summer teaching for honors students in the Governor’s program and graduate coursework as a James Madison Fellow.

The authors, collectively, have more than 30 years of classroom teaching experience. The two primary authors are members of the original SSIRC research team and conducted the
first round of data collection including demographic and statistical information, observations, and interviews. Ms. Reynolds was assessed as conducting a moderately challenging AIW in her classroom. We all participated in the qualitative data collection and analyses, and extended interviews to gather further data on her effective class discussion.

During 2010, we gathered observations and research notes from three separate classes, five interviews (four in person, one via email, three post-observation), and course documents. Analysis included triangulation of multiple data sources and member-checking, both built into data collection and analysis for the purposes of achieving accuracy and trustworthiness. The initial data analysis involved scoring the observations and assigned tasks with the AIW rubric developed by SSIRC. Our secondary data analysis emerged from statistical results focused on classroom discussion as a significant point of success in the classroom. This qualitative analysis proceeded from noting patterns and themes to arriving at comparisons and contrasts to determine conceptual explanations of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Our analysis confirmed and elaborated upon the quantitative analysis, which identified Ms. Reynolds as a teacher who is both willing and able to facilitate exemplary classroom discussions with her students.

**Results**

After observing several spirited, yet productive, discussions in Ms. Reynolds’ classroom, we inquired about her teaching methods to give depth to our quantitative results. Given the highly participatory nature of Ms. Reynolds’s U.S. History classroom, we found her use of discussion was efficacious in developing the students’ democratic learning community. In a reflective email, she noted,

> Discussion changes every time I plan a lesson. Sometimes, I want an in-depth discussion that lasts a half or full day. Often, within a lecture, I try to put time in for smaller discussions/debates so that students have a chance to participate and respond. I think it’s important for students to engage in their learning and contribute to the classroom environment consistently, whether in smaller segments or as a more focused and formal discussion setting. (A. Reynolds, Interview, March 1, 2010)

Ms. Reynolds created a rigorous classroom culture with discussion permeating her curriculum as evidenced in research observations, interviews, lesson plans, and reflections. The data fell into three themes: (1) strategizing an organic discussion; (2) promoting an interactive stance between students, teachers, and content; (3) facilitating student connections with the content.

**Strategizing An Organic Discussion**

It may seem contradictory to use the words strategy and organic in the same sentence, however, throughout the variety of data collected, Ms. Reynolds clearly and consistently planned for open-ended class discussion, “I know that I can hit that sweet spot with content, but sometimes it’s just organic.” Ms. Reynolds highlighted the importance of planning for discussions:

> I think it comes down to planning. Planning a discussion is important, you don’t want to say, ‘How do you feel about abortion?’ to a room full of kids [laugh]. If you do that, you’ve never planned a discussion. The students don’t know what’s going on and that’s a nightmare. You’re gonna get in trouble. Planning something means that it’s not so much structured as it is planned out. For example, you think, ‘I am going to give them this information. Then I would like them to discuss X, Y, and Z, and I want to help them get
there and I want to make sure I call on particular students in particular ways,’ so I have a plan for success going into it. (emphasis in original, A. Reynolds, Interview, May 6, 2010)

We conversed with Ms. Reynolds further and she revealed her discussion ground rules. She established boundaries in the first days of class, and then reinforced them throughout the year. Skilled redirection of inappropriate comments, in addition to forging a relationship with students well enough to talk with them freely, all set the stage for effective discussions. Our observations both during and after class, revealed Ms. Reynolds’ students felt comfortable talking with her in and out of class on a range of topics. Further interviews suggested that establishing warm relationships with her students was an integral part of her plan to encourage students to talk in class. As well as establishing a sense of belonging among her students, Ms. Reynolds carefully considered how she would balance teacher and student talk when she planned her daily lessons. During her student teaching, Ms. Reynolds’s mentor teacher pushed her to aim for significant student discussion and interaction as her AIW classroom data demonstrated high levels of substantive conversation (Saye et al., 2013). This mentor taught Ms. Reynolds to use a graphic organizer to track the amount of teacher and student input into a lesson (Figure 1).

![Graphic organizer for student-centered learning](image_url)

*Figure 1. Graphic organizer for student-centered learning.*

The above figure illustrates student and teacher contribution to the class. Graphing the quantity of discussion/contribution by each participant allowed for careful planning and re-adjusting of lessons that could have been too teacher centered. Graphing levels of contribution could also be tracked over time to determine the amount of input from teachers and students. Ms. Reynolds sketched the box from memory and narrated, her mentor would ask, “Is the teacher giving a full-class period lecture?” If yes, then she should plot a data point on the side of the box closest to Teacher-centered Learning section on the graphic organizer. The second question, “Are the students generating their own discussion based on documents?” If yes, then we plot a data point closer to Student-centered Learning. By graphing the elements of a lesson or activities within a
unit, a careful planner could ensure student engagement carried the balance of the time and determined which days needed to be redesigned to focus more on students.

*Figure 2.* This example demonstrates too many teacher-centered activities.

The above graphic organizer illustrates a lesson, or series of lessons, that are simply too focused on teacher-centered learning based on the amount of teacher talk and teacher-directed activities plotted on the graph. This level of teacher input would not allow for significant levels of student discussion.
Figure 3. The above figure illustrates balanced student-centered and teacher-centered activities

Ms. Reynolds preferred to adjust lessons to provide for more contributions from students thus she created a student-centered classroom. The balance of teacher and student talk was clear in Ms. Reynolds’ lesson on the Election of 2000 and the George Bush presidency (A. Reynolds, Observation, April 24, 2009). Prior to the observation, Ms. Reynolds informed us this was primarily an interactive, multimedia lecture. The *PowerPoint* slides were not laden with text for student notes; rather they presented provocative images such as a close up of a butterfly ballot, or adjacent maps of the electoral vote and the popular vote. Ms. Reynolds’s strategic questions, “How might a ‘butterfly ballot’ issue in Florida affect the presidential election?” guided the discussion. She was able to transmit information to students in deliberate and short chunks that linked content to visuals. A video clip of a *Saturday Night Live* skit of the first presidential debate between former U.S. Presidents, Bush and Gore, provided entertainment; however, this afforded an opportunity for her to discuss why comedians might portray the candidates in those ways, and how those portrayals might affect elections. By presenting a *PowerPoint* lecture through relevant photos, videos, maps, charts and political cartoons, Ms. Reynolds was able to plan both access to content and an organic discussion. In a post-observation interview, Ms. Reynolds shared,

There is a time and a place for a lecture that simply delivers information to the students, but, within a lecture, a teacher who wants to encourage discussion and debate can plan to involve her students at strategic points...whether it is to bring their attention to a specific historical debate, give them a chance to respond to an image, or put themselves in the place of an important leader and determine what decision would be best for the country. (A. Reynolds, Interview, April 29, 2009)
She emphasized a day labeled as lecture could become a discussion balanced between student and teacher led engagement, hence the strategically organic nature of her classroom. While she planned the content and guided student learning, conversations within a lesson were typically left to chance. Ms. Reynolds said,

Students will always have questions about content, but planning for discussion beyond these somewhat random events gives the teacher a chance to assess student understanding, affords students a mental break from the barrage of information the teacher is giving them, and allows students to process and relate to history before they go forward. When students relate actively to the story, they are more likely to remember the information and become further engaged in future activities. Discussions can be as short as a few minutes, or can take the place of teacher-centered delivery of information. (A. Reynolds, Interview, April 29, 2009)

In another interview, Ms. Reynolds shared that during or after lectures, she might plan to have students do the following:

- Interpret a political cartoon or significant artwork;
- Evaluate the actions of a particularly unusual person or group;
- “Cast a vote” for an historical election and explain the decision prior to revealing the victor;
- Reinterpret an event in “high school terms,” as if it were happening in their life;
- Find parallels between current and previous learning. (A. Reynolds, Interview, May 6, 2010)

By integrating student discussions into her lesson plans, Ms. Reynolds conveyed to students that she expected them to construct knowledge rather than simply reproduce it.

**Promoting An Interactive Stance Between Students, Teachers, And Content**

Starting on the first day of school, Ms. Reynolds wanted to “break the ice” of history learning. Ms. Reynolds highlighted the importance of finding ways for students to connect with the content, in a post-observation conversation,

I share with students my own personal ‘history geek’ moments, tell them about when we get to topics that I’ve done my own research on and that get me excited. It starts the semester with the understanding that it’s OK to share what you know, OK to find something uniquely fascinating, OK to be yourself in history class. (A. Reynolds, Interview, May 6, 2010)

Within her classes, she pushed past the typical history narrative, and included weird moments in history. Speaking with us after a lesson, she believed students were attracted to the oddities of history,

Strange is universally interesting, and people in history weren’t perfect or uncomplicated. Students are used to the stereotypes of history they have previously been taught, but early on in the Fall semester it’s fun to show a clip of 1776 the Musical (Hunt, 1972) to show the founding fathers disagreeing and yelling at one another as they prepare to declare Independence. Letting the students have the experience of interacting with history and important leaders on a more personal, more human level can engage their learning, but there’s another layer of conversation when students start to ask why someone wanted to make a musical about the Founding Fathers and why it won Tony Awards. (A. Reynolds, Interview, May 6, 2010)
By modeling and providing opportunities for students to consider multiple perspectives via discussion, Ms. Reynolds established learning history as an interpretive act (Seixas, 1993; Stearns, Seixas & Wineburg, 2000; VanSledright, 2002) and demonstrated a knowledge facilitator’s stance (Grant, 2003).

In contrast to the textbook as the bastion of knowledge, Ms. Reynolds believed that students needed to actually do history. She spent the first week of class exploring historiography and teaching students how information is translated and transposed from events and sources into their textbook. By showing them how to analyze primary sources and modeling historiography, students learned to question knowledge, and opened themselves to exploring history from different perspectives. Describing an ideal class, Ms. Reynolds said,

I like when we start with a question or comment or something along those lines. When [students] have that liquid moment: ‘I got it, but I don’t, but I do, but I don’t,’ then they ask the group a question and some other kid answers it. You just kick back, and students start to talk to themselves about the topic, and I can step away and think, ‘OK, this was great!’ Those are the days I feel most successful because I set them up in such a way that students feel comfortable sharing all that, and they are willing to take the risk to say, “Hey, I know something and I’m kind of a dork, but I know it and will share.” (A. Reynolds, Interview, May 6, 2010)

Prior to an observation of a lesson on Vietnam, Ms. Reynolds had provided the following primary sources to students to read and analyze: The Declaration of Independence, Democratic Republic of Vietnam, LBJ’s speech Peace without Conquest, John Kerry’s testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Nixon’s Peace with Honor speech, and several provocative images taken during the conflict. Students were asked to work in small groups to collaborate on a large graphic organizer representing how each person depicted in the resources may have experienced the conflict. Students considered how each person depicted in the sources might respond to the following question: “What was the most important lesson Americans should learn from the Vietnam conflict?” (A. Reynolds, Observation, April 15, 2009) While students initially struggled to place themselves in the shoes of others, there was a great deal of discussion among the students, most of whom chose to participate in the decision making in creating the graphic organizer. This class was just one example of how historical thinking and primary source analysis could nurture student relationships with one another; these relationships further facilitated group dialogue and the co-construction of knowledge (Palincsar, 1998). The individualized perspective taking was related to the third and final theme of making connections.

**Facilitating Student Connections With The Content**

When students were engaged in learning and saw clear connections between the history content and their own interests, they wanted to participate in class discussions; in fact, as Ms. Reynolds noted, it was often difficult to stop discussions. Her students were eager to be heard and to be understood; thus, they frequently defended their historical interpretations. In one observation, she challenged students to determine the roles of the American colonists and British soldiers in the Boston Massacre; and reminded them that no one had first-hand knowledge of the event and asked students who was right, the colonists, or the soldiers. She said, “Students walked in the door yelling at each other – ‘You are wrong! They were totally guilty!’” She laughed and said, “They all turn into lawyers on you!” During another observation, she asked students to imagine fishing with Andrew Jackson and think about what kind of conversation
might ensue and why. By using discussion starters like these, Ms. Reynolds’ was able to help students relate to the content (A. Reynolds, Observation, October 9, 2009).

Most importantly, Ms. Reynolds helped students figure out how to think for themselves, “I like to play Devil’s Advocate…in some ways it helps discussion, especially if there is no one in class to disagree and challenge them, it provides a sounding board for them to solidify their stance and ideas.” (A. Reynolds, Interview, May 6, 2010) According to Preskill (1997) “Discussion is one of the ways that groups help individuals to define themselves, to mark differences, and similarities with others and to explore the limits of knowledge and understanding” (p. 325). These connections to history played an essential role in piquing student interest and the resulting discussion.

Ms. Reynolds ensured historical interpretation had a central place in her classroom. By carefully selecting primary sources, Ms. Reynolds offered her students refreshing and unique content; thus enabled them to question the known and to find relevance. We observed one lesson that began with a diplomatic, witty letter written in excellent English by the Indians of the Six Nations to William and Mary College that implied a genial relationship. When students read this document, they confronted their preconceived notions of Native Americans. Ms. Reynolds let her students’ discussion meander and swirl around as they questioned the document from every angle, made sense of it, and looked for ways to relate to this letter (A. Reynolds, Observation, October 16, 2009). This is where her classroom discussions were most effective. Ms. Reynolds consistently gave students chances to come to their own conclusions and outlined new historical information they wanted to know.

**Discussion**

Classroom discussion is important as both a way of knowing and a way of being together (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Newmann, Marks & Gamoran, 1996; Parker & Hess, 2001). This microanalysis of Ms. Reynolds’ U.S. History classroom demonstrates that she planned for effective discussion in her U.S. history classroom by establishing and maintaining three substantial criteria: (1) planning and preparation of a welcoming classroom community, (2) appropriate and provocative content material, and (3) student engagement. Efficacious discussion piqued her students’ interest, promoted their critical thinking, and provided opportunity for these students to engage in civic, and civil, discourse. Students need to “know democratic things and do democratic things” (emphasis in original, Parker, 2008, p.65); classroom deliberations in this setting were both a means and an end to democratic principles.

Most teachers often go to great lengths to prepare themselves and their students for effective discussions (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Dillon, 1994; Hess, 2008, 2010; Parker, 2001; Parker & Hess, 2001; Roby, 1988). An example of this type of preparation includes establishing an open, democratic classroom environment as early as the first day of school. Instituting ground rules for classroom interaction is important; but the less tangible classroom environment is critical. Students must believe they are a valued part of the classroom community and that peers and instructors welcome their contributions (Larson, 1999). By strategizing the learning goals and appropriate discussion methods, teachers can work towards student understanding, consensus, respectful disagreement, or decision-making about the content material. Explicitly teaching students to: comprehend and analyze the texts and to develop and convey their arguments is critical as is determining how to assess the discussion (Brookfield &

Scholars overwhelmingly argue the importance of approaching topics from multiple perspectives (Avery, Bird, Johnstone, Sullivan & Thalhammer, 1992; Grant, 2003; Hess, 2009, 2009; Parker & Hess, 2001). As observations of Ms. Reynolds’ teaching suggests, her choice of content material was key to promoting effective discussion with her U.S. history students. The interrogation of primary sources may provide deeper understanding of texts or issues as the students’ collective understanding is richer than individual understandings of historical materials and questions about the past. Discussions about public problems, historical challenges, or current events can allow students to practice actively engaging in democratic processes, with the aim of reaching a decision about what we should do to achieve an end as a community of citizens.

Well-chosen materials for class discussion raise persisting historical questions (Saye & Brush, 2005). Such questions lend themselves to conflicting interpretations that provide students the opportunities to identify, to understand, and to develop historical arguments through discussions in a safe space. Students may invest in learning if relevance is established and if they understand and value the work (Flynn, 2009). Students, as cited in Larson (1999), need to be interested in a topic in order to participate in a discussion on that topic, and they must believe that discussion is a worthwhile method of instruction.

Teachers must become comfortable with conducting discussions and convinced it is worth the effort (Hess, 2010); Ms. Reynolds models both comfort with discussion and successfully manages it as a viable pedagogical strategy. Charting levels of student and teacher input allow her to avoid the common mistake of conflating recitation with discussion (Grossman, 2011, Larson, 1999). Teachers’ perceptions about the purposes of social studies, dispositions about democratic education, and their epistemological beliefs about the nature of knowledge factor heavily into decisions to teach “with and for discussion” (Hess, 2009, p. 55).

Ms. Reynolds fostered effective discussion by her deft use of curriculum and pedagogy, consequently opening dialogical spaces for students to interrogate, debate, and justify their stance on historical topics in ways befitting democratic ideals. For John Dewey (1916), democracy is “primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 68), the use of discussion in the classroom is one significant (Hess, 2008) means of developing students’ skill in establishing and maintaining their membership in our democracy.

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