Talking It Out: Online Discussion Forums in the Social Studies Classroom

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As most teachers realize, classroom discussions have limitations including time restraints, reserved participants, or domineering discussants. With the advent of Web 2.0, the opportunities for class discussion have expanded to include synchronous and asynchronous discussion boards, blogs, and wikis. Discussion forums, as an extension of classroom discussions and activities, allow teachers to target multiple social studies skills while giving students opportunities to expand their own historical understandings via peer interaction. Whether the goal is to address specific historical thinking skills or push students to think about what it means to be an active citizen in a diverse society, discussion forums can play an integral role in the development of students’ understanding of society. I describe the reasons for expanding discussion into these new mediums and provide examples of students’ online discussions. Recommendations are offered for teachers who would like to begin using discussion forums in their own classrooms.

Key words: discussion, historical thinking, technology, Web 2.0, authentic intellectual work, active citizenship

Introduction

Social studies teachers are constantly looking for ways to improve students’ critical thinking skills. In recent years, this search has shifted to emphasize 21st century skills and historical thinking skills as part of inquiry-based lessons. A key area of emphasis is the role of discussion, both inside and outside of the classroom. As most teachers realize, classroom discussions have limitations including time restraints, reserved participants, or domineering discussants (Larson, 2003, 2005; Larson & Keiper, 2003). During the early years of technology integration in social studies classrooms, the use of tools such as word processors and computer programs to facilitate drill and practice, tutorials, word processing, games, and simulations was emphasized (Berson, Lee, & Stuckart, 2001). With the advent of Web 2.0 and the increased use of course management systems and online tools, the opportunities for class discussion have expanded to include synchronous (posts are made in real-time) and asynchronous (participants make posts over extended periods of time) discussion boards, blogs, and wikis.

The months leading to the upcoming 2016 Presidential election will provide teachers a wide variety of core social studies themes to discuss with students. As the election cycle begins, teachers may want to consider using online discussion to examine social studies themes arising from the campaigns. There are number of considerations when integrating an online discussion forum into a class including whether the discussion will be:

- Synchronous or asynchronous?
- Threaded or non-threaded?
- Entirely text based, or include visual or audio elements?
- Open or closed forums?
- Graded or ungraded?
Each of these considerations should be addressed based upon the availability of technology tools to students in the classroom at school and at home.

With these considerations in mind, I present the findings from a study of online discussion forums centered on the 2008 Presidential elections. I review the literature relevant to online discussion and its role in critical and historical thinking, then analyze and discuss three threads within a single open forum. The discussion offers recommendations for teachers who would like to begin using discussion forums in their own classrooms.

**Discussion in the Social Studies Classroom**

The importance of implementing discussion as a means of developing social studies skills is well established. The National Council for the Social Studies Standards (NCSS) calls on students to analyze, discuss, and problem-solve (2010). The more recent development of the College, Career and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards builds upon the use of inquiry learning to encourage participation, deliberation, and collaboration to show understanding of social studies concepts (Swan et al., 2013). These inquiry skills are directly related to the development of citizenship skills necessary for democratic life (Hess, 2008, 2009; Parker, 2000; Parker, 2008; Selwyn, 2000; Snyder, 2008). Equally important is the role of Authentic Intellectual Work (AIW) in discussion. Authentic Intellectual Work provides opportunities for ongoing discussion regarding issues that affect students’ daily lives (Newman & Scheurman, 1998). These real-world connections help to make social studies relevant to students’ interests and socio-cultural background (Salinas, Blevins, & Sullivan, 2012) and to their personal-cultural histories (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Discussions utilizing participatory media, however, require some unique considerations. Online discussion forums are not intended to replace in-class discussions, nor should they. Rather, online discussion represents an opportunity to enhance and extend class discussion topics and mitigate, to some degree, the problems of in-class discussion.

**Why Use Online Discussion Forums?**

**Technology As a Tool for the Social Construction of Knowledge**

Technology use within the social studies has been theoretically situated as social construction of knowledge. The role of technology within social studies has been historically under-theorized. Researchers note a strong philosophical and theoretical foundation are necessary to understanding the why and how of specific pedagogical practices, including use of technology (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003). The role of social constructivism is emphasized in the “active creation and modification of thoughts, ideas, and understandings as the result of experiences that occur within socio-cultural contexts” (p. 77). The construction of knowledge occurs through the learner’s active role in fostering the development of multiple perspectives. Equally important to knowledge construction is the role of technology in facilitating human interaction, critical thinking, and the creation of authentic intellectual experiences (Berson, Lee, & Stuckart, 2001).

Online discussion forums provide students with opportunities to develop an understanding of historical topics and to enhance critical thinking skills through social interaction with their peers and teachers (Greenlaw & DeLoach, 2003). Informed by Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), students engage with near peers who are slightly ahead of them in critical thinking ability. Students’ peer interactions are mediated by the varying cultural knowledge of others. Such knowledge may be significantly different from an individual’s lived experiences, thus leading to the development of cognitive
conflict (Piaget, 1955). The struggle to reconstruct existing schema will, over time, propel students toward a more complex view of the world they inhabit.

Building on the idea of the expansion of schema via the ZPD, Mark Warschauer (1997) focused attention on the role of text-meditational interpretation which views texts as “‘thinking devices’ to generate new meanings collaboratively” (p. 471). Further refinements of the model emphasized the roles of “expressive speech and writing, peer collaboration, and meaningful problem-solving tasks” in providing students the opportunity to “learn through talk” (p. 471). Online discussion forums act as a cognitive amplifier by recording the flow of thought throughout the discussion thread and keeping these recorded conversations available for future reflection. Traditional texts in schools are used as a vehicle for performances such as reading aloud; however, Warschauer notes texts (in this case the written communications within a thread) can be used as a way of capturing students’ understanding at a given point in time. Online discussion forums also provide opportunities for students to reflect further and to refine their understandings through subsequent posts. The forum transcripts provide scaffolding for students as they attempt to gain an understanding of historical questions.

**Scaffolding the Development of Critical Thinking in Multimedia Environments**

The use of embedded hypermedia resources and scaffolding within multimedia environments, reported by John Saye and Thomas Brush (2002, 2004, 2007) focused attention on the need for both hard and soft scaffolding (2007) as a means of moderating some of the obstacles to the development of critical reasoning in students. “Teachers provide soft scaffolding when they engage learners in supportive dialogue based on their diagnoses of immediate learner difficulties. Hard scaffolding, on the other hand, can be planned in advanced by anticipating common learner problems” (Saye & Brush, p. 205). Hard scaffolds include guiding questions, concept maps, or outlines. The authors examine two obstacles faced by learners: a lack of deep engagement with the content and the failure to consider alternative perspectives. Their analysis is, therefore, concentrated on the need for problems that reflect “ill-structured, multilogical, and controversial” real world issues (Saye & Brush, 2007, p. 78). The authors center their inquiry on five competencies for critical thinking outlined by Fred Newman and Geoffrey Scheurman (1998): 1) empathy, 2) application of abstract concepts to new situations, 3) ability to draw inferences from limited data, 4) engagement in critical discourse to clarify understanding, and 5) applying evaluative criteria to defend their decisions. In the end, Saye and Brush (2007) suggest the use of mediated technology offers a way to scaffold learners toward higher levels of critical and historical thinking (p. 80).

The premise of mediated technology as a form of scaffolding was investigated through the creation and the use of the Decision Point! (DP) program in 11th grade history classes over multiple years (2002, 2004, 2007). The DP program included an interactive database consisting of multimedia resources on the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. The database includes embedded scaffolding tools to help students analyze and evaluate primary and secondary historical sources such as texts, images, audio, and audiovisuals. The scaffolds provided to students were divided into two types, hard and soft. Hard scaffolds included embedded “supports that can be anticipated and planned for in advance based on typical student difficulties with a task” (Saye & Brush, 1997, p. 81). A type of hard scaffold, the conceptual scaffold, was provided to help students organize sources by categorizing them. Soft scaffolds were considered to be “dynamic and situational” (p. 82) wherein teachers constantly monitored students’ understandings and provided just-in-time support as issues arose. This meant asking students higher order questions...
such as: “What does Lewis mean when he says ______? Why do you think he uses the word ______? Do you find similar words in King’s speech?” (p. 82). After the first year of the study, Saye and Brush found the teacher used very little soft scaffolding, but students who used the DP environment and its embedded hard scaffolding demonstrated statistically significant higher levels of factual knowledge and dialectical reasoning.

Out of this early work, Saye and Brush (2009) argued scaffolding helps reduce the cognitive burden on the learner. Hard scaffolding strategies such as Summarizing, Contextualizing, Inferring, Monitoring and Corroborating (SCIM-C) (Hicks, Doolittle, & Ewing, 2004), storyboards, reflective journals, and hyperlinks (Saye & Brush, 2004) can be used to reduce students’ cognitive load. Asynchronous online discussion forums serve a similar function with the reflective journals used by Saye and Brush (2004). The use of scaffolding within online multi-media environments, coupled with the ongoing interaction with peers, exemplifies Warschauer’s (1997) view of technology as cognitive amplifier.

**Peer Interaction in Developing Critical Thinking**

Online discussions can aid students’ development of critical thinking skills. Most research has looked at critical thinking in terms of written work (such as essays) or in-class discussion (Greenlaw & DeLoach, 2003). Writing is considered essential for critical thinking because students are required to justify their arguments (Greenlaw & DeLoach). Support also comes from W. Lee Hansen and Michael Salemi (1990) who assert in-class discussions are valuable because they forces students to “confront multiple alternative viewpoints” (p. 27). They argued that online discussion forums, particularly asynchronous forums, combine the best of both worlds.

Discussion forums make possible continuous interaction with peers’ ideas, which is a requirement for schema growth (Bruner, 1960). In an examination of online discussion forums as a way to overcome some of the disadvantages of classroom discussion, Bruce Larson and Timothy Keiper (2003) note discussion requires learners be actively engaged in answering open-ended questions. These questions should force them to justify thoughts and ideas and to substantiate claims with evidence. From this base, online discussion forums can be beneficial as they reduce teacher authority and increase students’ ownership of the discussion. Unlike traditional classroom discussions, where the teacher leads discussion, and determines who speaks, online discussion forums allow students to post their comments when ready. At the time of their study, Larson and Keiper noted while there were many anecdotal stories concerning in-class and online discussions, there were few studies specifically looking at the differences.

Over a three-year period, Larson and Keiper incorporated asynchronous online discussions into their pre-service teacher methods courses (a total of 20 class sections) and found 29 different threaded discussions occurred. One consistent similarity was the difference concerning interaction patterns in each form of discussion. The analysis of both in-class and online discussion forums centered on controversial topics students were asked to debate. A number of findings presented themselves including: the use of declarative statements versus clarifying statements, the expression of passion about a subject, the person doing the talking, and the time demands of discussions.

For the purpose of my study, the findings related to the use of declarative versus clarifying statements and who is doing the talking are instructive. Students, when participating in online discussions, were more likely to make a declarative statement that answered the instructors prompt without paying much attention to the posts of their peers. This behavior did
not appear during the in-class discussions. Once students were provided with soft scaffolding in the form of the instructors asking students to respond to their peers’ comments, however, student interactions within the forum increased. Students tended to ask for clarification, challenge the claims of their peers, or respond immediately to a comment during in class discussion while these behaviors took longer to develop (five minutes versus three days) in the online forums. Inserting soft scaffolding into the online discussion forum was much more difficult than during class discussions as there was no way to guarantee that students took notice of the instructors’ probing questions or ideas.

In terms of who is doing the talking, Larson and Keiper (2003) understood speaking out in class is a difficult proposition for some students. Within the discussion forums, a greater number of students participated so, they postulated there could be any number of reasons for the greater participation in the online forums. Some of these reasons included: students viewed the online forums as a safer environment than face-to-face settings, students appreciated the reduction of competition to be heard, and students had an opportunity to think about their ideas before putting them out for public scrutiny. The forums also provided instructors with additional opportunities for formative assessment through the availability of the transcript of the discussion within the threaded forums through which all students’ voices were heard.

Recently, Karyn Lai (2012) investigated the use of online forums to foster and assess student participation, focusing on several key critical thinking skills including: justifying the arguments, responding to criticisms, and contributing to the conversations. Course goals were aimed at helping students to understand the nature of reasoning and provided practical experience in using the critical thinking strategies addressed through a combination of classroom and online resources. Students were provided with two discussion forums, one designed to extend in-class discussion and a second specifically addressed an online assignment in which students collaboratively engaged in text analysis. The need for thoughtful responses may not be possible during in-class discussions, a point also made by Keiper and Larson (2003; 2005). The assignment not only required students to engage with their peers in the analysis of an article, but also required them to complete an individual analytical essay over a two-week period. Students were provided with reading prompts to guide their discussions, a task that supports Saye and Brush’s (2002; 2009) understanding of the role of hard scaffolding. The instructor monitored and minimized moderation. Checks were made only for appropriate use of language and misleading statements that might derail the discussion. The low level of moderation was consistent with Saye and Brush’s view of soft scaffolding, and the author reported no soft scaffolding was necessary during the course of the two-week discussion. In the end most students were moderately successful in their application of critical thinking skills within the discussion forum. She, however, notes that 33% did not successfully demonstrate critical thinking. She attributes this finding to students’ unfamiliarity with being assessed on the critical thinking skills exhibited rather than on the content of their posts. Significantly lower scores of students on their individual essays substantiated this finding. Lai suggests the use of rubrics that set the criteria for different levels of attainment within the discussion forum. Modeling the standards and expectations for the assignment should also be used to enhance the students’ analysis.

The cognitive amplification of Web 2.0 tools facilitates interaction between students and allows for the development of critical thinking skills through student participation in asynchronous online discussion. Students’ access to the history of the discussion (via the
discussion thread), along with the hard and soft scaffolding provided by instructors, and the extended time to formulate answers, allow students to practice critical thinking skills (Berson, Lee & Stuckart, 2001; Larson & Keiper, 2003). At the same time, students are afforded opportunities to examine their own understandings as they confront the epistemologies of their peers. Students are also provided with concrete opportunities to make their own voices heard (Lai, 2012; Larson, 2005; Ravenna, Foster, & Bishop, 2012).

A Note on Historical Thinking

Historical thinking can be defined as the habits of mind used by historians as they examine sources and artifacts in order to answer historical questions and to create historical narratives (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Lévesque, 2008; Seixas, 2006; VanSledright, 2004; Wineburg, 2001). These are the critical thinking skills used specifically by historians in their work. Although there is some overlap between general critical thinking skills and historical thinking, such as looking at an event from multiple perspectives and grounding arguments with evidence, there are some elements unique to historical thought. These features do not come naturally to students and must be explicitly taught (Wineburg, 2001).

The historical epistemologies described by historical thinking theorists are part of Piaget’s schema theory, and students must develop the ability to “refine, revise and add to their picture of history either through new evidence or through reliance on historical authorities” (Seixas, 1993, p. 303). Through their encounters with historical thinking principles in the classroom, students’ current historical epistemologies are challenged, generating the cognitive conflict needed for schema development. Asynchronous online discussions provide teachers with a way to scaffold historical thinking through the discussion forums to build upon specific historical thinking skills such as contextualization (including empathy for actors and understanding of their agency), sourcing, determining significance, and corroboration of evidence through the analysis of multiple primary sources within an inquiry framework. The need for extended reflection is important as it allows students to further refine and revise their understanding of historical events. Online discussion forums facilitate this reflection. As they interact with their peers on the forum, students are forced to revisit the past comments of others, as well as their own posts, allowing them to refine their historical thinking epistemologies.

Writing to Learn

Due to their primarily text-based interface, discussion forums provide unique opportunities for writing-to-learn. In 2003, Perry Klein and Mary Rose developed a design experiment to create specific instructional approaches for teaching writing. Using Marlene Bereiter and Carl Scharnalia’s (1987) model, Klein and Rose generated strategies that included frequent writing in the content areas, the use of argument and explanation, instruction on the effective use of sources, and self-evaluation. The study showed that carefully created prompts requiring students to include evidence and practice argumentation skills within their forum posts led to a better understanding of the topics as well as an increase in their ability to argue and explain difficult concepts. Similarly, Pantelis Papadopoulos, et al. (2011) studied the use of prompts to help students focus on key issues within ill-structured problems. Students were divided into a control group and two experimental groups. The groups included: no prompts (control), a writing mode group (experimental) where students were asked to write responses to specific prompts, and a thinking mode group (experimental) that prompted students to merely think about the answers to the prompts. They found students’ retention of concepts within ill-structured domains improved when asked to write regularly in an online environment. These
research findings support key elements needed for the development of both critical thinking and historical thinking. The studies align, additionally, with a number of the Common Core State Standards, Anchor Standards for Writing (CCRA.W) (Table 1):

Table 1. Common Core State Standards, Anchor Standards for Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CCRA.W.1</th>
<th>Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or text using valid reasoning and relevant and specific evidence.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCRA.W.2</td>
<td>Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization and analysis and content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCRA.W.5</td>
<td>Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCRA.W.6</td>
<td>Use technology, including the internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCRA.W.8</td>
<td>Gather information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCRA.W.9</td>
<td>Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection and research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCRA.W.10</td>
<td>Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes and audiences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010)

The research base on the use of online discussion forums and other Web 2.0 tools suggests these technologies play a role in social studies classrooms. The cognitive amplification provided by online discussion forums mitigate to some degree the problems of in class discussions while also providing students with opportunities to engage in inquiry and authentic intellectual work as they ask and answer their own historical questions. Through their online conversation students’ critical and historical thinking skills are developed as they respond to the hard and soft scaffolding of the instructor. Online discussions also provide teachers a unique window into their students’ thinking that can be leveraged within the classroom to promote more critical, complex understandings of social studies content.

**Method**
This qualitative interpretive study was carried out within a large, central Texas suburban school district beginning in 2007. Discussion forums were utilized in the junior and senior level *History of the Americas* classes as a way to keep students engaged with the essential questions of the course for the year. Two forums were piloted on the school’s intranet during the 2007-2008 school year. Students were required initially to post to two closed forums where the topics of discussion were the essential questions for the courses: “What does it mean to be an American?” and “What is the United States’ role in the world?” In addition to the essential questions posed by the teacher within the closed-forum, students were given the opportunity to pose their own questions in a separate open forum, which generated multiple threads on a wide variety of topics. This forum differed from the essential questions forums as students were allowed to post on topics of their own choosing with the caveat that they should address issues raised within the course content. Directions for both forums reminded students to include their own questions, epiphanies, and connections to current events and history as they discussed the topics within each forum. Students were required to make a minimum of one post per week during each six-week period, although many students posted multiple times across different threads (see Table 2).

Table 2.
Multiple Posts for Selected Forums

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum Topic</th>
<th>Total Number of Posts</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2-4</th>
<th>5-9</th>
<th>10+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VOTE!</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Campaign</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let’s Protest…Or Do Something!</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two closed forums were used during the first semester to introduce students to the idea of forums and their appropriate use; open forums were introduced at the end of the first semester. This gave students some choice in the discussions they participated in, while also ensuring regular posts were made. Fifty-three students from three sections of the *History of the Americas* class participated in the forums over the course of the school year. Students from each section participated in the same forum, allowing students to interact with peers in their own class as well as those enrolled in the other sections (see Table 3).

Table 3.
Forum Topics and Total Number of Posts, 2007-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum Topic</th>
<th>Number of Unique Posts</th>
<th>Duration of Discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VOTE!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Campaign</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let’s Protest…Or Do Something!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do we [U. S. ] really have it better?</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12/29/07-1/11/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does patriotism go too far?</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12/29/07-1/07/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate America: Are corporations leading to the downfall of America?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12/29/08-1/14/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the Role of American in the U. N. ?</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1/4/08-1/9/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion/Facts/Research: Are You Sure (Presidential Campaign)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1/7/08-1/8/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did Jefferson change Locke’s ideas?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1/7/08-1/8/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The State of the U. S. Economy: How can we save the economy?</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1/24/08-1/31/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is Nationalism a good thing?</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11/27/07-1/7/2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who Supports President Bush and why?</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12/6/07-1/9/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The War in Iraq: Why are we still there?</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12/9/07-1/8/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does it mean to be an American? (closed forum)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>11/4/07-1/8/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is America’s place in the world? (closed forum)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11/4/07-12/28/07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the American Dream?</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12/3/07-1/14/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Role does Religion Play in American Society?</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>11/25/07-1/7/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catching up to the Japanese (Technology &amp; Economics)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1/30/08-2/26/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important are commercials to political campaigns?</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3/2/08-3/27/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why aren’t companies making electric vehicles?</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1/20/08-2/26/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the Articles of Confederation fail because we [U. S. ] were a new nation or because of its flaws?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1/27/08-2/8/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are there still feminists in America?</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2/26/08-3/24/08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Unless otherwise noted all forums are open (student-generated) topics.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Date Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why isn’t the government funding research on green technology?</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1/30/08-2/27/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has immigration shaped America in the past and today?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2/8/08-2/26/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has industrialization affected the world in the past and today?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1/29/08-1/31/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama is Islamic? Is it really relevant to political campaigns?</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2/28/08-3/26/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the Constitution still relevant or should we start over?</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1/27/08-2/7/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let’s Protest…or Do Something…Where is our generations’ Boston Tea Party?</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1/30/08-2/28/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would either candidate (Obama/Clinton) get votes based on race or gender?</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1/28/08-1/30/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should the U. S. be involved in foreign affairs</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1/29/08-1/30/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the effects of social and cultural change on society (immigration/emigration focus)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1/29/08-2/24/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you thinking about the U. S. giving $123 million to Saudi Arabia from which 15 of the 19 9/11 terrorists were from [sic]?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1/30/08-2/29/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do we save the economy from downfall (2008 recession)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1/24/08-1/28/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who do you think are the REAL [sic] Americans these days?</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2/21/08-3/1/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote! Would you? What do you look for in a president?</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1/30/08-2/29/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting: Why don’t adults think what we think matters?</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2/27/08-3/27/08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Sources and Analysis

Transcripts of the threaded discussions within the open forum were printed, and a content analysis was conducted utilizing the constant comparative method (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to derive the categories or themes upon which the findings in this paper are based. For the purposes of this paper, the analysis is focused on three concurrent open forum threads that took place over a two-month period from January to February 2008 with 33 of the 53 enrolled students participating in one or more of the threads. The discussion threads analyzed centered on the 2008 presidential campaign and the Democratic primary underway at the time. An additional contextualization for the forum threads was the announcement of a debate to be held at a local university between two candidates for the Democratic nomination, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, which fueled much of the discussion within the threads. The study was guided by the research question: In what way(s) does the socio-constructivist nature of online discussion forum(s) foster students’ historical thinking skills? Three themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) active citizenship as good citizenship, 2) reality versus the ideal, and 3) negotiating personal agency.

Theme 1: Active Citizenship as Good Citizenship

The most consistent theme across each forum thread was the idea of citizenship in general, and more specifically, the role of citizens in terms of voting, choosing candidates to support, and organizing to effect change. Out of these discussions three characteristics emerged that can best be summarized as putting the onus of good citizenship on individuals taking action. The most obvious form of individual action is voting. Students viewed voting as a key (if not the key) to active citizenship. One participant, Jacob (all names of participants are pseudonyms), stated, “…if I do not participate in the process then I have no valid claim to complain about anything” (Jacob, 1/30/2008, Re: VOTE! [Online forum comment]), an idea repeated by Dennis in his post, “If you don’t vote, you can’t complain.” (Dennis, 2/29/2008, Re: VOTE! [Online forum comment]). Denise went one step further claiming a person should not criticize public policies if he or she did not “voice [his or her] opinion where it can influence the outcome.” (Denise, 1/30/2008, Re: VOTE! [Online forum comment]). The sentiment was reiterated by
Bella who commented “because I have the privilege to voice my opinion through a vote, I wouldn’t pass up the chance” (Bella 2/5/2008, Re: VOTE! [Online forum comment]). Voting as a key to engaged citizenship is further corroborated by one of the initial questions posed in the Vote! Thread: “If you could vote, would you? Why or why not?” (Skye, 1/30/2008 Re: VOTE! [Online forum comment]). Of the 22 posts in this thread, 23 agreed they would definitely vote. The view of voting as an individual act of citizenship fits with the students’ discussion of voting as both a privilege and an obligation. Only the individual can decide whether to engage with responsibilities as a citizen so, those who give up that responsibility lose the right to complain about the results. This idea was made more explicit as students took up the discussion of what they looked for in a presidential candidate.

Theme one carried over into the Presidential Campaign thread in a section of the discussion devoted to campaign tactics, specifically the keeping of campaign promises. William laments,

They all make promises, which they think will appeal to the most people; so they are able to become the next president, and when they do become president, remember all the promises they made? Well very few actually get accomplished (William, 1/29/2008, Re: Presidential Campaign [Online forum comment]).

Paulo concurs, “Promises made by these candidates are expected but not guaranteed” (Paulo, 1/29/2008, Re: Presidential Campaign [Online forum comment]). Paulo’s and William’s low expectations are challenged by Jacob, who asks,

But why, this is to both William and Paulo, can we not, as voters & citizens, take these promises…these expectations and make sure that they become acted upon? . . . Why would anyone in the their right mind vote for someone knowing for sure that not all they say is going to come true? . . . Would it not be best if we elected a person that would really do what they say they will?” (Jacob, 1/30/2008 Re: Presidential Campaign [Online forum comment]).

This post was followed a few minutes later by an additional post stating politicians do not lie, “they simply tell us what we want [to hear], and then we never hold these people accountable to do what it is they said they would do” (Jacob, 1/29/2008, Re: Presidential Campaign [Online Forum Comment]). Addison concurred,

I kinda [sic] agree with Jacob, many elections are run based on lies, deceit, and much butt-kissing. And people general[ly] buy into the crap, and when they realize they’ve been led astray, what do we do? Whine, gripe, but never really act” (Addison,1/29/2008, Re: Presidential Campaign [Online forum comment]).

The theme of active citizenship via voting carries over from the Vote! Thread to the Presidential Campaign thread through the idea of trusting candidates to keep their campaign promises once they are in office; if that trust is broken it is up to the voters (as individuals) to exercise their right to vote and to expel the individual from office. A sub theme is that of apathy. The tone of the posts clearly point to a belief that broken campaign promises are a fact of life that has led many voters to abdicate their responsibilities as citizens.

Throughout these two threads students negotiated with their peers to define the idea of active citizenship through their interaction with their peers’ ideas, assumptions and conclusions regarding the impending presidential election. The topics (Presidential Campaign and Vote!) acted as a type of scaffolding for talking about active citizenship. It is not surprising students’ gravitated to the idea of voting as active citizenship as the enacted curriculum in many schools.
stresses the role of democratic processes, including voting, through the use of mock presidential elections, Model U. N. and Student Council. Students absorbed the message of the importance of voting.

**Theme 2: The Ideal versus Reality: The Informed Citizen**

Students actively engaged in discussion of making informed decisions about candidates for elected office throughout the forum. The Presidential Campaign thread began with an explicit question asking students if they thought voters would vote for a candidate based exclusively on race or sex (Karen, 1/28. 2008, Re: Presidential Campaign [Online forum comment]). This question led to a lively discussion during which students wrestled with the roles of not only race and sex, but they also advocated for the characteristics that should play a role in choosing a candidate. Most students argued sex and race were not sufficient reasons for voting for a particular candidate although their justifications for this belief varied.

Ron argued sex and race should not play a role because it makes the assumption “Black people will vote for Obama and women will vote for Clinton” suggesting the additional assumption that “both of these groups are unable to make the same intelligent decisions as anyone else” (Ron, 1/30/2008, Re: Presidential Campaign [Online forum comment]). The underlying idea in Ron’s post is assuming a person will vote for a candidate solely based on some shared characteristic oversimplifies peoples’ motivations and further perpetuates the idea they are incapable of making an informed decision. Although he argues voters should not vote based on a singular characteristic, Ron also concedes “there are some who can’t seem to look past a person’s gender, race or religion” and “who will vote for them [the candidate] based solely upon that characteristic” (Ron, 1/30/2008, Re: Presidential Campaign [Online forum comment]). Ron’s belief that race and gender should not play a role (or at least not the sole role) in voting was supported by his peers. Leesa concurs, posting that although the Obama and Clinton campaigns would play to black and female voters, she was not optimistic:

…people will not vote on them [the candidates] based on their views and things that they’ve done [because of the fact that] their race or gender is new to the presidency [sic] campaign. I think people will choose them solely based on that. I’m not saying everyone will do that but there are some people out there that will vote according to this fact (Leesa, 1/30/2008, Re: Presidential Campaign [Online forum comment]).

The novelty of a female and an African-American as candidates for the Presidency also surfaced in Maysie’s post, which she starts by noting “this year’s campaign has crossed many new frontiers” then she relates a personal experience of hearing her mother “say that she might vote for Hilary, just because she is a woman” (Maysie, 1/29/2008, Re: Presidential Campaign [Online forum comment]). Joe points out “while there does seem to be a strong net of support for Obama and Hilary, you have to remember that there could be just as many, if not more, people who would vote against them because of this” (Joe, 1/29/2008,Re: Presidential Campaign, [Online forum comment]). The posts point to students’ belief that many people abdicate their responsibility to be informed voters.

The notion of voting based upon common characteristics (honesty, trustworthiness) or trait (gender, race) was viewed as antithetical to the ideal of informed voters. Meg argues that although many people do vote based upon surface characteristics or party affiliation, she adamantly proclaims, “That’s just wrong, it is our obligation as Americans to research the candidates and to vote smart” (Meg, 1/30/2008, Re: Presidential Campaign [Online forum comment]). Similarly, Maysie added voting based upon gender “is not a good enough reason to
vote for her” [Clinton] (Maysie, 1/29/2008, Re: Presidential Campaign [Online forum comment]).

The Vote! Thread explicitly addressed the idea of informed voters in the initial post that asked students what they looked for in a president. Despite the general agreement that voters should arm themselves with information before entering the voting booth, students acknowledged that the reality is quite different. The cognitive conflict between students’ understanding of the importance of voting in democratic societies based upon informed decisions (as presented in the enacted curriculum) and the reality that many voters do not come close to exemplifying this ideal frustrated students. Although this frustration is evident within the Presidential Campaign and Vote! Threads, it bubbles over into a separate thread and manifests itself within the discussion of the notion of individual agency in general and students’ individual agency in particular.

**Theme 3: Negotiating Individual Agency**

Agency can be defined as actions taken by individuals to effect change and throughout the discussion threads notions of individual agency appeared. Beginning in the “Presidential Campaign” and “Vote!” threads, students advocated for the important role of individuals as voters within democratic societies. The notion that voters should take the time to educate themselves about the candidates is an example of individual agency, just as casting a vote is a type of individual agency.

The discussion thread entitled “Let’s Protest…or Do Something!” moves beyond the theoretical discussion of individual agency and allows students to begin to think directly about how their own actions can play a role beyond simply informed voting. Jacob began the discussion by addressing the many issues and opinions that had been under discussion in other threads and asks: “Why don’t any of us do anything? We all sit around and say things…. How these politicians lie to us, don’t meet our expectations, and we all want to be heard, right? So why don’t we do anything?” (Jacob, 1/30/2008, Re: Let’s Protest …or Do Something [Online forum comment]). Jacob’s use of the term “we” suggested the need for collective action on the part of students to “demand the change WE WANT, because we… are going to be the ‘movers & shakers’ of tomorrow.” (Jacob, 1/30/2008, Re: Let’s Protest …or Do Something [Online forum comment]). As part of his justification, Jacob mentioned the collective agency expressed by American colonists through their actions at the Boston Tea Party as an example of the type of action he has in mind; individuals protested collectively through violent action designed to force a confrontation with authorities. The mention of this historical example of collective agency formed the basis for students’ discussion of their own agency and acted as a scaffold for the posts of his peers.

Students expressed the desire to be heard using statements such as Patty’s call for her ideas “to be taken seriously” (Patty,1/3/2008, Re: Let’s Protest…Or Do Something [Online forum comment]), or Addi’s proclamation “we should do something!” (Addi, 2/28/2008, Re: Let’s Protest…Or Do Something [Online forum comment]), however, they disagreed over the best method to achieve this goal. Patty latched onto the historical example put forth by Jacob as an example of what not to do, asking,

How did the government view these people? Not as people they wanted to listen to or help or take seriously. After the Boston Tea Party, the British saw us as unruly children. And I don’t know about you, but I feel as though, because I put so much
thought into my opinions, I don’t want to be seen as some kid throwing a tantrum
(Patty, 1/30/2008, Re: Let’s Protest…Or Do Something [Online forum comment]).
In Patty’s view, the Boston Tea Party only made the situation worse. She concludes that the
negative perceptions of the British toward the American colonists did not help the situation.
The event, instead, made the situation worse by undermining the serious nature of the colonists’
concerns, as suggested by her reference to her own feelings when her thoughtful opinions are
ignored.

Patty’s thoughts were echoed by Melinda:
The Boston Tea Party threw away millions of dollars into the harbor. Maybe they
reached a few people, but their rash actions led to the Intolerable Acts. Their harbor was
closed and don’t you think the city suffered because these Patriots were so quick to
rebel? I know you can argue that sympathies with Boston helped pull the country
together, but was that truly the only solution? (Melinda, 2/17/2008 Re: Let’s Protest…Or
Do Something [Online forum comment]).
Melinda’s argument built upon Patty’s contention that violent, collective protest is ineffectual.
Melinda, however, moves beyond Patty’s argument to include the suffering caused by British
passage of the Intolerable Acts as justification for pursuing change through other avenues.
As the discussion developed, students’ arguments began to coalesce around the idea of
the violent collective protests of the past as ineffectual in a modern, media saturated society.
They began advocating for individual action. Bill noted,
I honestly don’t think that rebellion is the way to go…I do agree, however, that if what
one wants is radical change, they [citizens] should put forth their efforts to improve the
country. Propose new laws, maybe ending up in a government position, joining a
lobbyist group, all good ideas for getting change (Bill, 2/1/2008, Re: Let’s Protest…Or
Do Something [Online forum comment]).
Jessica argued,
… we don’t need to dress up like Indians or raid the countryside, but we can all do
something to make this world different. . . . when we give our time to a cause,
however trivial it may be, we are affecting someone else’s life. We don’t need to go
head-to-head with the government to change things (Jessica, 2/1/2008, Re: Let’s
Protest…Or Do Something [Online forum comment]).
Brett thought “we can make a difference in the world by doing something else than physically
protesting or pouring tea off a boat” (Brett, 2/7/2008, Re: Let’s Protest…Or Do Something
[Online forum comment]). Bella stated although “Creating a rebellion may be a way of having
your voice heard, there is not only one way to resolve a problem (Bella, 2/12/2008, Re: Let’s
Protest… or Do Something [Online forum comment])
As students discussed their thoughts about protest they began making connections
between the historical contexts of protest and modern contexts. Meg believed, for example,
protests of the Boston Tea Party variety would,
…be ineffectual in todays [sic] day and age. If you really have a problem the way to
go about it is quiet change, use the media to get you point across not violence or
stupidity. I mean what is the point of [a]n education if you just resort to violence at the
first sign of something you don’t like? (Meg, 2/26/2008, Re: Let’s Protest…Or Do
Something [Online forum comment]).
Bella highlighted,
Something that might be better is if you find out what you don’t like about their actions and establish awareness to [sic] others and see what you could do to make a difference…. In most riots I think many people get pulled into the crowd from the heat of the moment (Bella, 2/12/2008, Re: Let’s Protest…Or Do Something [Online forum comment]).

Brett reiterates her point,

I think society has become more mature and I think there is more to making a difference and making our beliefs heard than just protest. We can make our beliefs heard through debates and actually explaining our problems out and make a resolution with the other side. Not everything has to be a fight (Brett, 2/7/2008, Re: Let’s Protest…Or Do Something [Online forum comment]).

In each case, students are using their experiences of living in a media-saturated society where media awareness campaigns, televised debates, and social media play a role in the shaping of public opinion as well as policy. By this point, the debates between the candidates for the Democratic nomination for President were in full swing and students’ suggestion that change can be affected via public debates and media campaigns (as opposed to collective protests, violent or otherwise), made sense within the media-rich context in which students lived. Students’ aversion to collective protests as legitimate options for individual agency appears to have been based upon the idea that the negatives of the Boston Tea Party (the British perception of colonists as children in the midst of a temper tantrum and the suffering caused by the passage of the Intolerable Acts) outweighed the positives (unifying the colonists against British rule). Students limited their interpretation of the efficacy of collective protest to this one example, ignoring the huge gains in individual rights achieved by the modern labor and civil rights movements, with the exception of Brett’s suggestion that we talk our problems out peacefully.

The thread culminates with the recognition of personal individual agency in a sub-thread of the “Let’s Protest” discussion. Students had just returned from attending the Democratic debates. A discussion about individual agency that had previously been academic took on a much more personal tone as students brought their debate experiences to bear on the question of individual agency. Casey was the first to speak out,

Do you think it is fair for people, reporters, teachers and parents not thinking what we think matters about the upcoming election? I want to know and understand more about the election and the people who could be running the country that I [‘m] living in so I know what to expect” (Casey, 2/27/2008, Re: Let’s Protest…Or Do Something [Online forum comment]).

Casey was piqued about the dismissive attitudes of some adults toward young people, and she asked a fair question of her peers.

Hamish also voiced frustration when he wrote,

Sure, most of us don’t have a ‘real’ vote, but to support and endorse a candidate means that you really do care how the election turns out. Even though most of us won’t be able to vote now, the president will still be in office in 4 years (January 2013), and likely to be in office for another 4 (2017). By that time, we will be in our mid 20s and should be proud that we were able to influence voters even before our numbers even counted” (Hamish, 2/29/2008, Re: Let’s Protest…Or Do Something [Online forum comment]).

From Hamish’s perspective, the interest young adults have in elections early on will influence how civically active they are later on in life. Students should be proud they are interested and
willing to work for their beliefs, regardless of their voting status at any particularly moment in time. This represents an expansion of the idea of individual agency as informed voter to also include taking action to support a candidate or cause.

Paulo’s post continued the discussion by calling on adults to reconsider their views (he is quoting from an opinion piece he wrote for class):

> I want each and every one of you to open your views to include even the younger generation of voters. Why? Because in the next decade we will be able to vote, and over the course of the next four years we’re going to be heavily influenced by the decision[s] made by whichever presidential delegate [sic] is chosen. Many of you [adults] have said it yourselves, ‘we [students] are the leaders of the future’ (Paulo, 2/27/2008, Re: Let’s Protest…Or Do Something [Online forum comment]).

Paulo turns adult rhetoric back on those who talk about civicly disengaged youth while at the same time denigrating the views of those who want to engage. Students were clearly frustrated by this double standard. They experienced cognitive conflict between what adults have told them is important (via the enacted curriculum) and adults’ responses to students’ attempts to express their individual agency. Nancy’s post furthered the discussion when she comments, “If we don’t start now, then when will we? Why not learn how the process goes so that when it’s our turn to vote we have an idea as to what happens?” (Nancy, 2/27/2008, Re: Let’s Protest…Or Do Something [Online form comment]). Nancy and her peers have hit upon one of the major components of social studies education—the creation of thoughtful and engaged citizens. All three students point to a key difficulty (from their point of view) in achieving this goal of creating thoughtful engaged citizens: adults who do not value students’ efforts at engaged citizenship.

Through their discussions on adult perceptions of youths’ civic engagement, students wrestled with the cognitive dissonance created by their desire to be engaged in juxtaposition to the adult rhetoric of disengagement. The double standard does not make sense to them and they sought confirmation of their ideas within the forum. The forum became their voice, a place to confront the misperceptions and hypocrisy of their encounters with some adults. The desire of students to be heard by the adults in their world was most elegantly stated in a single line by Jack in an earlier forum also discussing the election, “Where is our revolution?” [Jack, 2/20/2008, Re: Voting [Online forum comment]].

Discussion

Over the course of two months and through multiple interactions with their peers, students broadened their understanding of the meaning of individual agency. The view of text as a “thinking device” (Warschauer, 1997, p. 471) that allows for the collaborative generation of new meanings is on display throughout the discussion. Students started from the enacted curriculum and the idea of engaged citizenship defined as informed voters, and worked their way to the idea of multiple forms of engaged citizenship as they discussed the political campaigns of the day. The transcripts of peers’ posts, along with the forum topics themselves provided a form of soft scaffolding (Saye & Brush, 2004). In this case, students’ ideas about voting as a form of individual agency had an effect on their posts in the “Presidential Campaign” and the “Let’s Protest” threads. At the same time, issues from other threads including immigration and health care reform were reiterated in students’ posts on what they looked for in a President.

Despite the low-level soft scaffolding provided by the enacted curriculum and cross-fertilization of forum topics, it was clear additional soft scaffolding by the instructor was needed.
The instructor provided an opportunity for student ownership of the discussion posts as a way to reduce teacher authority and to allow the discussion to develop holistically (Lai, 2011; Larson & Keiper, 2003). The students’ foray into presentism in the “Let’s Protest” thread, along with the lack of additional historical examples of successful collective agency are areas where a well placed question or example could have pushed students toward more nuanced understandings. Some soft scaffolding was introduced by referencing discussion posts within class discussion and lessons; however, it was not enough to move students in the right direction. The difficulty of changing the direction of an online discussion (unless they were explicitly told to do so) versus the relative ease of changing direction during in class discussion was a key finding of Greenlaw and DeLoach (2003). Their study supports the importance of explicit, ongoing soft scaffolding both within the classroom and the discussion forum if discussion forums are to be used effectively.

From a historical thinking perspective, students’ discussions regarding individual agency were instructive. Students were able to connect the agency of historical actors to their own individual agency in the present. Students achieved a sense of their own agency over the course of their participation in the forum. From the enacted curriculum, students’ discussions of voting as the primary mode of individual action led to the rejection of communal, violent protest, and the recognition of other ways to have their voice heard via civic participation. This perspective, in turn, led to students’ frustration over their desire to effect change in the face of multiple hurdles, as a result of students’ realization of their own agency. This would certainly support the Social Studies goal of developing engaged citizens. The single-minded focus on individual over collective action, as well as the absence of historical examples of successful collective actions would suggest that students’ conception of agency is still limited. This may be a result of school history curriculums that emphasize rugged individualism and the self-made man hand-in-hand with a society that glorifies individualism. Students have absorbed the official narrative and failed to see alternatives. The lack of additional soft scaffolding, as aforementioned, was also a factor.

Platforms

A variety of platforms can be used to host online discussions. The most traditional option is the threaded online discussion forum such as those embedded in course management systems like Moodle™ or Blackboard™. Facebook™ and Edmodo™ allow for non-threaded discussions via status posts. Unlike more traditional discussion forums, Facebook™ and Edmodo™ can be used as either synchronous or asynchronous, depending upon your needs. Blogs are another platform for extended discussions. Unlike a threaded discussion where individual posts are usually fairly short, blogs allow students to write more extensively and reflectively than threaded discussions. The comment feature on many blogs can be used for discussion of the students’ ideas. Edublogs™ is a popular blogging site for education, but Google’s Blogger™ and Wordpress™ also work well, with all offering free site creation. Although many discussion forums are primarily text-based, audio-visual materials can be used to further enhance the discussion via embedded video and audio or links to video and audio presentations. VoiceThread™ provides a platform that allows teachers to post visuals and audio for students’ discussions, while students can post their replies as either audio or text comments.

Access to online tools is another necessary area for consideration. Ideally, students will have access at both home and school, but invariably there will be some for whom this is
problematic. Prior to implementing online discussion forums, it is best to communicate with technology facilitators in your district to determine which of the web tools mentioned above would be most appropriate for your class. School districts’ filtering and social media policies may limit access to some tools, while some students may be dependent on school computers to access the forums. Thinking about issues of access prior to integration of discussion forums into your classroom will allow for a smooth(er) implementation.

**Rules of Engagement**

Consider your goals for the forum. In the early stages, it is often advisable to begin with closed forums moderated by the teacher. This structure enables the teacher to monitor and to model appropriate online posting etiquette before turning students loose in an open forum. Students can get comfortable with the online medium before they are tasked with posing their own questions. Regardless of whether closed or open forums are selected, clear guidelines for posts should be established that include how often posts should be made, to whom they should be made, and (if they are to be graded) the criteria for grading. The provision of ongoing hard and soft scaffolding, both within the forum and during regular class meetings is important. Utilizing discussion forums as a formative assessment will provide opportunities to revisit discussions in class, correct misconceptions and reinforce content and skills.

**Questions to Consider**

The content of discussion forum prompts is limitless. Teachers may want to concentrate on large conceptual questions such as What is the American dream? or What is the United States’ place in the world? Historical questions can be considered such as Why did Germany declare war in 1914? or How did the Cold War start? Such historical questions offer opportunities to include a variety of primary and secondary sources for analysis as part of the discussion. Making connections between historical events and students’ lives suggests a number of interesting questions to be asked, such as in what way(s) is the current economic crisis similar to or different from the Great Depression? What historical precedents are there for the Patriot Act? or, should elections be determined by popular vote? Questions such as these require students to provide evidence to substantiate their claims as well as consideration of the claims of their peers. You might consider using discussion forums as a writing to learn exercise wherein discipline specific writing skills, such as those delineated with the CCSS, Writing Anchor Standards are embedded within the discussion prompt, similar to the approach taken by Lai (2012).

**Conclusion**

Discussion forums, as an extension of classroom discussions and activities, allow teachers to target multiple social studies skills while giving students opportunities to expand their own historical understandings via interaction with peers. Whether the goal is to address specific historical thinking skills or push students to think about what it means to be an active citizen in a diverse society, discussion forums can play an integral role in the development of students’ understanding of society. Discussion forums also offer teachers a way to incorporate the Common Core State Standards, Writing Anchor Standards into the social studies classroom.
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