



Students reflect on their topic in preparation for a discussion during a class at Nathan Hale High School in Seattle on Friday, February 15, 2002.

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# Discussion in Social Studies: Is it Worth the Trouble?

Diana E. Hess

IN A FAMOUS “SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE” sketch, comedian Jerry Seinfeld, playing a high school history teacher, attempts to start a discussion with rote factual questions, such as “Who was Britain fighting in World War II?” The agonizing recitation that follows never evolves into a discussion; it becomes painfully clear that the students know virtually nothing about the topic, and even less about how to participate in a productive discussion. Finally, Seinfeld gives

up, swallows a handful of pills to quell his upset stomach, and accedes to a student’s offer to bring in the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to show in class the next day. While simultaneously hilarious and depressing, this skit also illustrates an unfortunate reality: Even though many social studies teachers value classroom discussion, it is rare in most social studies classes.

As a case in point, Martin Nystrand and his colleagues observed social

studies classes in 106 middle and high schools and found that 90 percent of the instruction involved no discussion whatsoever. When there was discussion, it was short: 42 seconds in length, on average, for eighth grade classes and 31 seconds for ninth grade classes.<sup>1</sup> The difficulties teachers encounter when trying to promote high quality discussion among students undoubtedly contribute to the brevity and rarity of such discussions. Teachers report that discussions fail because only a few students have usually completed the necessary preparatory work for effective participation, because some students persistently monopolize while others are silent, because their own facilitation skills

“Research & Practice,” established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited classroom discussion researcher Diana Hess to help us understand why this pedagogy is so difficult and whether it is worth the trouble.

—Walter C. Parker, “Research and Practice” editor, University of Washington

are weak, and, most significantly, because what students say is often of low quality and their remarks are often off topic. Given these problems, it is not surprising that teachers question whether discussion is worth the trouble.

Here, I address that question by drawing together research that (a) defines discussion, (b) clarifies the problems of implementing discussion in classrooms, (c) specifies the benefits and characteristics of effective social studies discussions, and (d) suggests what teachers can do to facilitate good discussions. My conclusion is that discussion is particularly important in social studies courses because it is uniquely able to help students learn what social studies courses should be teaching.

### What is Discussion?

Just as there is “a literature” on academic topics such as the causes of civil wars or how children learn to read, there is a literature on classroom discussion. One of its central concerns is how to define discussion. Consider the following definitions developed by scholars with expertise in the theory, research, and practice of discussion.

Discussion is:

“the free exchange of information among three or more participants (which could include the teacher);<sup>2</sup>

“an alternately serious and playful effort by a group of two or more to share views and engage in mutual and reciprocal critique”;<sup>3</sup>

“a particular form of group interaction where members join together in addressing a question of common concern, exchanging and examining different views to form their answer, enhancing their knowledge or understanding, their appreciation or judgment, their decision, resolution or action over the matter at issue”;<sup>4</sup> or

“a kind of shared inquiry the desired outcomes of which rely on the consideration of diverse views.”<sup>5</sup>

Notice the differences among these definitions. The first is minimalist—requiring only a small number of participants and the simple exchange of ideas. The next definition describes the ethos of discussion (alternatively serious

and playful) and its content (sharing views and critique), but not the goal. The third identifies a precondition for discussion (there must be a question of common concern), the content (exchanging and examining views), and the purpose of the discussion (to form an answer, build knowledge, understanding, appreciation, or judgment). The fourth definition of discussion focuses on its purpose—inquiry, considered as a way to find out something that is not already known.

Notwithstanding the differences among these definitions of discussion, there are common features that help distinguish discussion from other forms of classroom talk, such as lecture and recitation. First, discussion is dialogue between or among people. It involves, at a minimum, the exchange of information about a topic (a controversy, a problem, an event, a person, etc.). Second, it is a particular approach to constructing knowledge. The approach is based most fundamentally on the idea that something positive can occur when people are expressing their ideas on a topic and listening to others express theirs. Beyond that, the multiple definitions given above illustrate one fundamental area of consensus about discussion: it takes many forms and is used for many purposes.

### Why Discussions Fail

While there are few discussions in most social studies courses, enough teachers do include them that we are able to consider what causes some to go well and others to go poorly.<sup>6</sup> Teachers and researchers who specialize in discussion report four central problems: the tendency of teachers to talk too much, to ask inauthentic questions, as well as the lack of focus and depth in students’ contributions, and the unequal participation of students.

In an insightful study of discussion in high school classes, Katherine Simon identifies the powerful role that teachers play in creating meaningful discussions.<sup>7</sup> Simon reports that discussions often fail when teachers shut them off prematurely, whether because they fear losing control of the discourse, are wary of the controversy that authentic discussion may create, or because they are simply not willing to

cede the floor to students. Simon’s findings illustrate a significant barrier to quality discussion: it is impossible to create good discussions if teachers talk too much. Not only does teacher monopolization of talk prevent students from having an opportunity to participate, it also communicates to students that their ideas are not valuable. In another study focusing on how high school students in social studies courses view classroom discussion, 80 percent of the students reported they would speak less in discussion if they felt that their ideas wouldn’t be valued.<sup>8</sup>

This is not to suggest that teachers should remain silent in discussions. Nystrand and his colleagues reported that the type of questions teachers asked accounted for whether discussions took off in the first place. Teachers who asked “authentic” questions that elicited students’ ideas instead of merely the recitation of information were much more likely to spark discussion and keep it going than the more typical “test-like” question with one correct answer. Because an authentic question is one for which the “asker has not prespecified an answer,” it communicates to students that the teacher values what students think, and not just their ability to recite back what others think.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this research found that a helpful factor in creating discussion was a type of questioning called “uptake,” in which teachers ask students questions about what they and other students said.

In addition to the problem of teachers who talk too much, or do not ask the kinds of questions that encourage discussion, students’ contributions often do not add up to a focused or in-depth analysis of important ideas. In weak discussions, it is common for students to skip rapidly from point to point, with few addressing specifically a comment or question previously raised. Because high quality discussion depends on a thorough analysis of only a few ideas, discussions that meander or move rapidly from idea to idea tend to be superficial. And if students are not prepared to participate, such a discussion can become what Thomas Roby calls a bull session: “a rambling, uncoordinated conversation in which the participants vent their opinions

with passion but exhibit little purpose and no reflection.”<sup>10</sup>

A fourth problem commonly associated with classroom discussion concerns not content but participation—not what students say but who does and doesn’t speak. In too many discussions, a few students monopolize while others remain silent. While it is not necessary for all students to participate at the same rates and in the same ways in discussion—imagine how dull that would be—most teachers and students are likely to consider a discussion more successful if many students are participating verbally to some extent.<sup>11</sup>

### Benefits of Discussion

Notwithstanding the difficulties of discussion, its absence in a classroom suggests a learning climate where all knowledge worth having is located in the teacher (who may just dole it out in lectures) and where the teacher is not just a central figure in the classroom but the *only* person who has a meaningful role to play in developing ideas. The benefits that accrue from high-quality discussion not only democratize the classroom but also help students themselves play with ideas and develop the skills of critical thought.

Because many of the questions that are most significant in social studies courses have multiple and conflicting answers, a form of classroom discourse is needed that teaches students how to sift through and evaluate competing claims and the evidence on which they are based. Consider some of the standard questions that students are asked in social studies courses: What causes revolutions? What are the origins of today’s Middle East conflict? How should a democracy mediate the tensions between security and liberty? Under what circumstances is war justified? Should my city enact a curfew? To all of these questions we can imagine competing answers. Discussion is particularly appropriate for subject areas such as history, psychology, government, and economics where multiple “right” answers collide. Discussion can teach students how to articulate their understandings of a question, explain their arguments, listen to how others think through the same

question, and challenge others’ responses. In short, discussion can help students think through the complicated dimensions of a complicated world.

Classroom discussion can also help students to better learn content knowledge. Nystrand and his colleagues measured the relationship between the amount of classroom discussion and student performance on knowledge exams and found a positive correlation. The “bottom line” for learning, they write, is “the extent to which instruction requires students to think, not just report someone else’s thinking.”<sup>12</sup>

Another benefit of discussion in social studies courses is that it can improve students’ abilities to dialogue across difference. Robert Dahl reminds us in *On Democracy*: “Silent citizens may be perfect subjects for an authoritarian ruler; they would be a disaster for a democracy.”<sup>13</sup> Although young people can learn how to engage in public discussion in a number of venues, schools have a special capacity to teach these skills. As Amy Gutmann writes, “Schools have a much greater capacity than most parents and voluntary associations for teaching children to reason out loud about disagreements that arise in democratic politics.” Schools’ greater capacity is embodied in the fact that they contain more diversity than one would expect to find in a family, church, synagogue, mosque or club. This diversity of views (and, by extension, diversity about which issues matter the most) makes classrooms powerful places to promote “rational deliberations of competing conceptions of the good life and the good society.”<sup>14</sup> Walter Parker writes in *Teaching Democracy* that this diversity is no less than “the key” to unlocking the potential of schools to educate democratic citizens, but only if it is cultivated in discussion.<sup>15</sup>

Evidence supports these claims. For example, research shows a positive relationship between discussion of complex policy issues (especially involving civil liberties controversies) and the development of tolerance as well as an understanding of why tolerance is necessary in democracies.<sup>16</sup>

Participation in discussions of controversial issues appears to influence

other forms of political engagement as well. An International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) study of 90,000 students in 28 countries is the most recent research advancing the importance of controversial issue discussions in an open classroom climate. “Open classroom climate” is a construct that measures the “extent to which students experience their classrooms as places to investigate issues and explore their opinions and those of their peers.”<sup>17</sup> The IEA researchers reported that discussion of controversial issues in an open classroom climate is a significant predictor of civic knowledge, support for democratic values, participation in political discussion, and political engagement.

Also, there is evidence that suggests participating in discussions in school has a positive influence on students’ civic behavior after they leave high school. Molly Andolina and her colleagues found that 18-to-24-year-olds who reported they had discussed issues in their high school classes were more likely to say they had participated in civic activities such as signing a written petition, participating in a boycott, and following political news most of the time.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, evidence suggests that young people like courses that emphasize discussion. In particular, Julie Posselt and I found that the majority of high school students studied believed that participation in discussion enhanced what they learned and made learning more engaging and fun.<sup>19</sup> At the end of a semester-long course that focused explicitly on improving students’ abilities to discuss challenging policy issues, a student reported that “the class overall made me think. Very few classes actually require you to think. It is a good thing, thinking, but it takes practice in order to learn how to think effectively and thoughtfully.”<sup>20</sup> Table 1 summarizes the benefits of effective discussions.

### Characteristics of Effective Discussions

Just as there is not just one definition of discussion, there is no single conception of what a high quality discussion looks like. It is possible for effective discussions to focus on a variety of goals: deepening

**Table 1: Characteristics of Effective Discussion**

- 1 Focus on an interpretable text, issue, idea, etc.
- 2 The facilitator and participants have prepared thoroughly.
- 3 Most of the talk comes from the participants, not the facilitator.
- 4 There is enough time spent on a particular idea to explore it thoroughly before going to another point.
- 5 Participants feel comfortable, but there is still meaningful argument.
- 6 Many people talk.
- 7 Participants and facilitator ask authentic questions and refer to previous points made in the discussion.

students' understandings of an idea, value, or issue; decision-making about a question under deliberation; or analyzing the causes of an important historical event. Good discussions can occur in small or large groups. *They focus on a shared text of some sort—primary or secondary sources, a film, the remarks of a guest speaker, a classroom or community problem.* Good discussions may or may not be formally evaluated. Students' verbal participation in discussions can be mandatory or voluntary, and teachers can take on any number of facilitation roles or styles. And yet, there are similarities among especially effective discussions. Research shows that good discussions are more likely to occur when they revolve around interpretable topics or questions, involve careful preparation by students, occur in open classroom climates, and require skillful planning and facilitation by the teacher.

One of the hallmarks of discussion is sharing, analyzing, and critiquing multiple perspectives. It stands to reason then, that an opening question for which there is a single right answer is not discussable. By contrast, questions that elicit and depend upon students' diverse perspectives are more likely to spark high-quality discussions. Virtually all of the case studies of

high-quality discussions in the literature share as their central feature a problem, text, topic, question, or issue that provokes multiple interpretations. For example, Simon describes an effective discussion about whether it was a "war crime" to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.<sup>21</sup> I describe middle school students deliberating whether to support a ballot initiative that would ban affirmative action programs in state and local government.<sup>22</sup> Each of these discussions focused on a well-defined issue that required students to express and compare different interpretations.

Researchers find consistently that the quality of a discussion is likely to be higher when students have prepared to participate. Whether preparation is done in class or as homework is immaterial; what matters is that students become acquainted with the discussion topic and engage in enough initial thinking about it to have something to say. When preparing students for discussions on Supreme Court decisions and other controversial public issues, three expert discussion teachers all required students to complete some form of "ticket" (an assignment students do to prepare for a discussion) in order to participate in the discussion. The "ticket" is not designed to show that the students

fully understand the decision or issues, but simply to illustrate that they had done sufficient work in advance to contribute to meaningful discourse.<sup>23</sup> Evidence from students about what causes them to participate in discussion lends credence to the teachers' insistence on pre-discussion preparation. More than 90 percent of students indicated that they would be more likely to speak in a discussion if they came into it with knowledge about the topic.<sup>24</sup>

Even with a highly interpretable question and careful preparation by students, much of the success of discussion depends on a classroom atmosphere that encourages students to participate verbally. When teachers are perceived by students as judgmental, they are much less likely to participate verbally in discussion. Their perceptions of how their peers' view their contributions to discussion also affects participation rates; 78 percent of the students surveyed in one study indicated that encouragement from classmates would make them more likely to speak during discussions. If students believe their classmates talk too much, they are more likely to respond with silence. Not surprisingly, direct criticism by their peers was even more likely to cause them to withdraw from discussion.<sup>25</sup> These findings suggest that it is especially important to teach students how to critique ideas without engaging in personal attacks, to encourage each other to participate without undue pressure, and to monitor their own participation levels so as not to dominate or remain silent.

Finally, two central features in effective discussions are that the teacher has planned them carefully and that he or she facilitates or monitors them skillfully. Just as students need to prepare for discussions, teachers need to prepare themselves and their students for effective participation. When teaching novice teachers about discussions, I am often struck by how odd this seems to them. These new teachers believe that the best discussions are those that evolve spontaneously from the students. To the contrary, research shows that effective discussions are much more likely to occur when they are planned. Teachers who do this well think carefully about what will be discussed, which discussion model

is best for the topic and purpose, what students will do to prepare to participate, and which skills students need in order to create quality discussions. Many teachers recognize that in doing this they are teaching both “with and for” discussion.<sup>26</sup> That is, they are using discussion as a form of interaction to promote disciplinary learning and democratic competence. They are also teaching students how to become better discussants. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of effective discussions.

### Becoming a More Skillful Discussion Teacher

I know of no teachers who believe that discussions in their classes are perfect. Just the opposite, teachers ask what they can do to more effectively teach their students to participate in discussions. My recommendations follow.

- study discussion
- experiment with discussion in your courses
- reflect on these experiments
- solicit feedback from students and colleagues
- plan your curriculum around discussion

Teachers can study discussion by participating in professional development programs or courses and by reading some of the recent literature that focuses explicitly on teaching with and for discussion (see the references at the end of this article). In the discussion leadership courses that I teach, participants videotape discussions in their classes and analyze them with a teacher partner. Teachers are encouraged to ask their students for feedback as well, and to ask them to reflect upon their discussions and to take responsibility for improving their quality.

Teaching students how to participate effectively in discussion is challenging, as is designing a social studies curriculum that provides ample opportunity for discussion. However, the benefits are substantial, however, enough to point clearly to this conclusion: discussion in social studies is well worth the trouble. 📖

### Notes

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14. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, Rev. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 44, 58.
15. Parker, *Teaching Democracy*, especially chapter 5.
16. Patricia Avery, “Teaching Tolerance: What the Research Tells Us,” *Social Education* 66, no. 5 (2002), 270-275.
17. Judith Torney-Purta and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, *Citizenship and Education in Twenty-Eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen* (Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2001), 137.
18. Molly M. Andolina, Krista Jenkins, Cliff Zukin, and Scott Keeter, “Habits from Home, Lessons from School: Influences on Youth Civic Engagement,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 36, no. 2 (2003), 275-280.
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