

Chicago Foundation for Education  
Teachers Network Policy Institute

Student Discussions  
in the  
Social Studies Classroom:  
An Action Research Study

Nora K. Flynn  
Walter Payton College Prep  
June 7, 2004

Structure:

- Purpose/Rationale
- Questions and Subquestions
- Review of Literature
- Context
- Tools
- Data
- Analysis
- Implications: Practice and Policy
- New Research Questions

Purpose/Rationale

Poorly-executed discussion plagued my student life, from elementary school through graduate school. While some students dominated discussions, others remained silent. Teachers clearly praised those who participated through speaking, though other forms of participation -- agreement, offering examples for support, rephrasing a statement for clarification, or asking a question -- seemingly were not equally valued as effective participation. As a student, I played various roles in discussion, depending on my peer group, my teacher's expectations, and my interest in the topic. However, once I assumed a particular position in discussion -- whether the risk-taker who offers an initial opinion or the silent nodder who is hesitant to speak up -- I rarely varied from the actions that characterize that role. Throughout my educational experience as a student, I've felt the range of emotions between paralysis and empowerment when in class discussions. While I don't remember much of the content covered in class discussions, I surely remember the feelings attached to particular class discussions.

As a teacher, I believe that teaching students how to negotiate in discussions is not only an important step to understanding the content I cover in History class, but is an essential skill in itself; the processes of critically analyzing, considering, and communicating are the basis of human interactions. Orally communicating one's ideas in a coherent way, and respectfully considering others' ideas are skills students must acquire for management of a variety of situations outside the classroom as well. Because I believe in preparing my students for both History class and beyond, I have participated in and led Socratic discussions, attended and run Paideia workshops, and continuously seek out methods to improve my students' discussions. All of these tools have helped me become aware of my own role as a facilitator of discussion, and I believe have helped me empower my students to practice a variety of roles in discussion. However, while I have reflected on my experience as a student and a teacher, neither in my workshops nor in my classroom have I formally reflected on my own students' personal reactions to discussions.

Thus, I look to the student's perspective of class discussions. I wonder how my students feel as they navigate through discussions. I wonder how they react to the discussion activities I use in class; how they view "successful" class discussions; how I can respond to their various levels of comfort in discussion. Most of all, I wonder how students can feel best prepared for independent discussion.

Questions

**What happens when students lead their own discussions?  
What preparation do students need to be successful in a  
student-led discussion?**

Subquestions

- What roles do students play in discussions?
- How do students perceive their comfort-level and role in discussions?
- What strategies do students identify and use as tools to negotiate in discussions?
- What is a “good” discussion, from a student’s perspective?

Review of Literature

Educators within the Social Studies focus much classroom time and reflection on oral participation in class. The discipline lends itself to critical reflection, varying interpretations, and civil debate. While some researchers look to improving class discussions, others ask why Social Studies teachers rely on them.

Diana Hess and Julie Posselt (2002) study the discussion of controversial public issues in a Social Studies course and base their research on the proposition that education for a democracy requires the ability to discuss and debate unresolved public issues. In contrast, William Wilen (2001) takes a pragmatic approach towards his research in discussion, using research to improve what Social Studies teachers already do in their classrooms – lead group discussions. Bruce Larson (2000) combines the theoretical and practical approaches in his research, “Influences on Social Studies Teachers’ Use of Classroom Discussion”. He writes that “Social Studies, with its connection to social interaction and civic participation, is thought to benefit from classroom discussion,” yet he then turns to question why teachers use discussion “as a means to promote more frequent use of that strategy”.

My own research is based partly on Larson’s idea that “Discussion skills include listening, making claims clearly, supporting claims with facts, helping a group move through obstacles, presenting a critique of ideas and not individuals (keeping a high respect for human dignity), and developing together a shared understanding of a problem or issue. If skill in discussion can enhance public talk among citizens, then we should identify discussion skills” (175).

This is a pragmatic approach with a theoretical basis, the combination loved by Social Studies instructors. Beyond the modes of exercising democratic relations, though, I simply want to answer Elizabeth Cohen’s (2002) question, “Can groups learn?”. I don’t necessarily think about democratic living every time I plan a group discussion. I want to know how students can achieve both content and process through my course in a practical way.

### Context

While others have questioned the use of discussion in Social Studies classrooms in a variety of contexts, my questions were researched in their own distinct environment: my World Studies classes at Walter Payton College Prep.

Walter Payton College Prep is one of five selective public high schools in the city of Chicago. The school's dual foci are technology and world languages; students have access to laptop computers throughout their classrooms, often utilize a distance learning lab, and can choose among five languages for study. Opportunities for international exchanges are being built at Walter Payton as the school refines its focus and graduates its first senior class in 2004. In many ways, Payton is not a "typical Chicago public school"; it has enviable facilities and opportunities available for its selected student population.

Students' test scores are a primary criteria for admission, and the approximately 800 students at Payton are aware that their high school is one of the most competitive for admissions in the state. Students arrive at this centrally-located school from as far southeast in the city as Princeton Park and as far northwest as O'Hare. They come from public, private, and parochial elementary schools as well. Walter Payton's student body is racially and ethnically diverse, with African-Americans, Hispanics, and Caucasians all hovering just above and below 30% of the school population. Asian students compose the remaining 10% or so of the student body. Overall, Payton's students are a talented group, at least as seen in their previous test scores. When talking with students, one realizes that they are indeed a gifted group with a diversity of experiences and a variety of backgrounds. What unites these students freshmen year at Payton is their eagerness to learn.

Payton Prep offers mostly Honors and Advanced Placement courses. Frosh all take Honors World Studies. The course is an introduction to world history and culture, and moves in an Area-Studies format, treating each region as a distinct entity in an increasingly global environment. The three teachers of World Studies follow a general scope and sequence, but develop their own objectives and assessments throughout their course. In my own course syllabus, the following broad objectives are defined:

"Students of history must be able to understand how cultural, political, and economic forces of the past have shaped and continue to influence our contemporary world. To meet this general objective, you will be able to identify, describe, and contextualize key events in world history; to employ effectively various methods of historical analysis; to evaluate critically differing interpretations of historical events."

Along with the expectation that students be punctual and prepared for class, the other two expectations of students in World Studies are to:

- actively participate in class discussion and activities
- respectfully consider interpretations and opinions different from their own.

Constructive and critical thinking, as well as expression of ideas, are emphasized in the initial outline of this course. In addition, according to my syllabus, students can expect:

- thorough explanation and analysis of content covered in the course
- an interactive learning environment, where thoughtful questions are welcomed
- a respectful and considerate treatment of differing interpretations

If one were statistically approaching World Studies, the methods of historical inquiry and evaluation would be 2/3 of the course, compared with 1/3 of World Studies being devoted to content. This proportion may not be maintained throughout the course itself, yet exposing students to a variety of tools to tackle history is certainly a propelling force of my practice in this introductory, yet honors-level, course.

It is with this background that the role of discussion and discussion-based activities can be questioned:

1. Payton students in Honors World Studies are a diverse group with a variety of educational experiences and personal backgrounds as they enter freshmen year.
2. A major emphasis in Honors World Studies is exposure to a variety of tools and methods with which to approach historical studies. One method used is discussion, in a variety of formats.

### Tools

Three ninth-grade honors level World Studies classes participated in this research as part of regular classroom activities. Five of the eighty-eight students in the classes are juniors or seniors repeating the core class, while the rest are freshmen. The following tools were used for this action research project:

- Student reflections  
Following four discussion activities, students were asked to reflect on class and small group discussion. The reflection questions asked students to assess discussion content, format, and their role in discussion.
- Teacher observation and reflections  
Throughout class discussions, I observed and noted student behavior. I mapped class discussion using a sociogram. After four discussion activities, I reflected in short journal entries on class and small group discussion to assess whether the goals of both content and process were met.
- Student interviews  
Four students were asked to conduct “a discussion about a discussion”. The students describe what they saw in a class discussion and analyzed its effectiveness within a conversation that I started and that they led.

Data

- A. Student Reflections
- B. Teacher Reflections
- C. Student Interviews

A. Students reflected on class activities throughout the year; four entries were used for research into class discussion patterns.

- Entry 1: At the end of the first semester, students were asked five questions:
  - 1) Which eras of history have you most enjoyed studying?
  - 2) Which class activities have enjoyed most and least?
  - 3) What roles do students play in a classroom discussion?
  - 4) What roles do you often play? Why?
  - 5) What roles do you never play? Why?

The first two questions were asked as a warm-up, and may be used later for research into the correlation between interest and motivation in class. Questions 4 and 5 were important for individual responses, but few “trends” could be seen. All responses were coded for roles (R) in and motivations (M) for discussion. Some students did not answer the “why” aspect of the question, leaving motivation up in the air.

- Responding to Question 3, students listed the following roles that they observe in discussions. This is a compilation of their lists, save the last two roles, which are direct quotes and are attributed to the students who made these observations.
  1. dominating the discussion, loudmouth
  2. listeners
  3. listeners with some input
  4. playing the game – not actively engaged, but looking as if you are
  5. not paying attention at all
  6. “smart person,” “comedian” (Andrew (student names have been changed))
  7. “There is always that student who everyone is surprised to hear a powerful statement from.” (Brenda)
- The following statements were made by students in response to the “Why” questions, four and five (What is your motivation for playing a particular role?). These statements in some ways capture “trends” in that a number of students shared the feelings expressed by the quoted students. However, those quoted directly had particularly telling statements to the teacher, given their individual patterns of participation in class.
  1. Interest level in the topic was the predominant reason students gave for participation in discussion.
  2. occasional input “because I like to get people to understand where everyone is coming from.” (Vivian)
  3. peer relations/ others’ perceptions
    - “I would never be the one to control or have a negative comment about someone else’s opinion/statement, because I wouldn’t want anyone to do that to me so I won’t do it to

- them. I don't like controlling people because somehow I think you're taking some of their freedom away." (Brenda)
- "I tend to only say things when I have a good point to put in or a good argument to start amongst others. I'm never the person who always has something to say. I don't want to look [like]an idiot if I haven't thought about the subject before I go into it." (Tom)
  - [I never play] " the big point maker because I could never take all the pressure of having people ask me a lot of questions." (Lisa)
  - "I don't like playing people that have done a major thing cause if I mess up the info or something then I'll be all stupid and stuff." (Donna)
4. "I sometimes play the one who knows but don't say because others say before I can put it in words." (Norman)
  5. No response was given about grades. This finding was particularly interesting because assessment within Social Studies classrooms is a hot topic. In the newsmagazine of the American Historical Association, Robert Gough reports that "[i]t is a shock...for a first-year college student to take a history course in which there may be only a mid-term, a final exam, and a term paper" due to the myriad assessments given and graded during the high school years (38). In addition, another study reports that "[w]e learned that although the vast majority of students held generally positive views about the importance of class discussion, nearly half of them believed that a requirement to grade their verbal participation in discussions was unfair" (Hess 2002). Students in my World Studies classes certainly care about grades, and occasionally ask if discussions are graded, yet when reflecting on their motivations for playing particular roles in discussion, they do not address the issue of assessment.

With this baseline of reactions to discussion in general, students in World Studies participated in six discussion-based activities throughout their year. The title of the activity is followed by a date, description and the content area the discussion addressed.

## Discussion-based Activities, World Studies 2003-2004

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Content Covered</i>
Quote Conversations	September 2003	a written "conversation" between two people centered around one quote	Renaissance and Reformation
Salon	November 2003	students assume the character of a historical figure and follow a particular agenda within their conversation with other historical figures	Enlightenment
Conference	January 2004	students role-play particular leaders and their topics of discussion at a historic conference, without knowing the true outcome of the conference	Cold War
Fishbowl	February 2004	students use primary sources to prepare for a discussion; particular students join an inner circle of discussion while the other students monitor the content and the form of the conversation, with an opportunity to join the inner circle as well	Colonial Latin America
Online Forum	March 2004	students use online resources to discuss in threaded discussions within an internet classroom	Cuba-U.S. Relations
Crisis	June 2004	students choose and construct a current events crisis facing the United Nations, then attempt to solve the crisis via negotiation	Terrorism at the Olympic Games

After each discussion activity, a written reflection on the method of discussion was completed by each student. Students responded to guided reflection questions to assess the discussion's content, its format, and their role in the activity. Reflection questions and findings follow:

**1. Salon**

Students were asked after the salon:

- Which role did you play in the salon?
- Use adjectives to describe the salon experience.
- What was the hardest part of the salon discussion?
- What was the easiest part of the salon discussion?

From data collected, analysis showed that:

- One student in each small group played the role of Marie-Therese Geoffrin, the host of French salons. This student moderated the small group discussion. The responses of these students showed a trend in frustration leading the group:

“The hardest part was starting and keeping the conversation going.”

(Samantha, Neil)

“Unfortunately, because Ms. Flynn didn’t control the small salons, our group often got out of control.” (Brendan)

“I wasn’t able to participate in the fishbowl because I was the host.” (Elise)

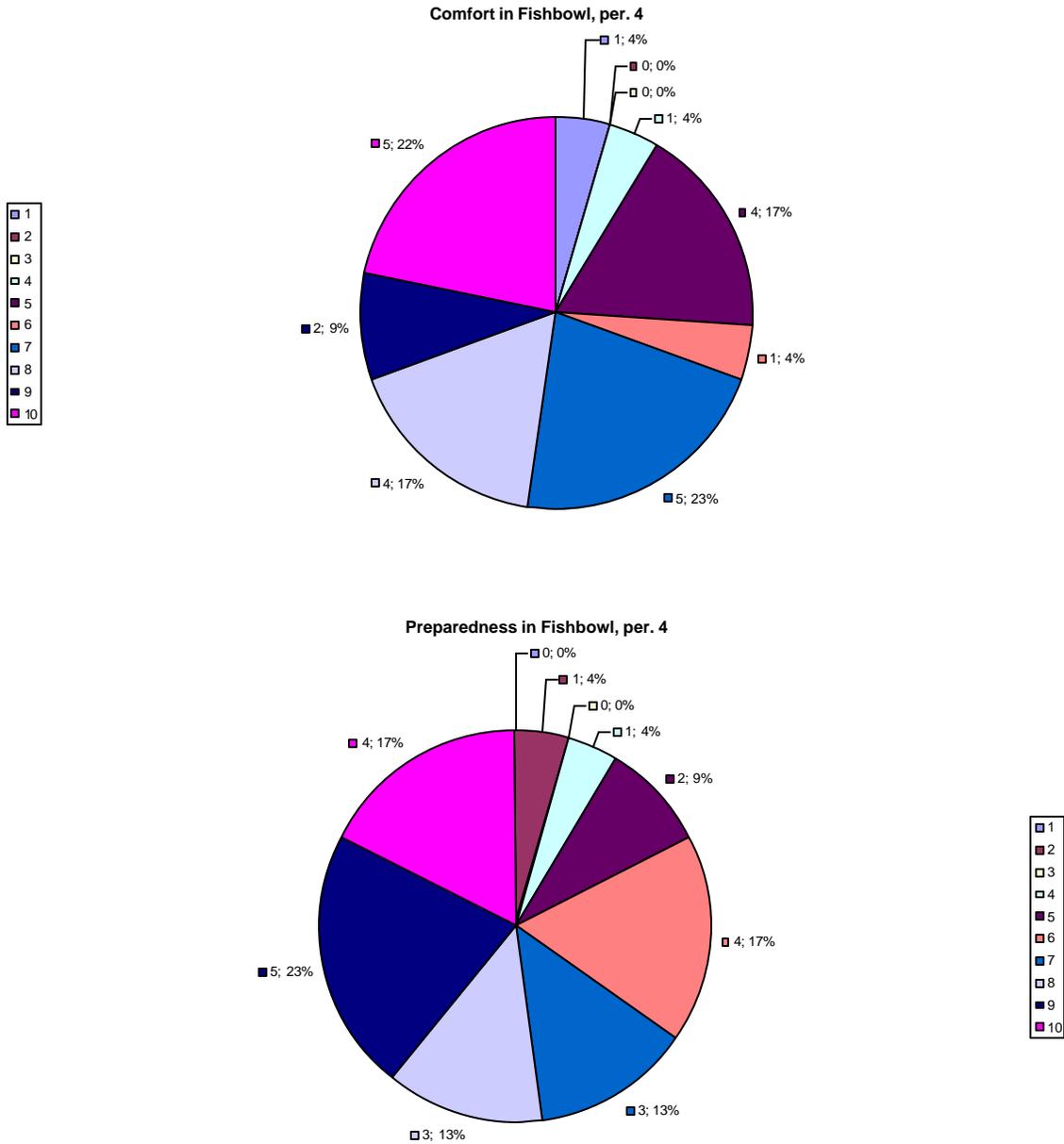
- Other students playing historical roles in general found positive aspects to be:
  - Getting in to character and understanding the ideas of the Enlightenment
  - Hearing various perspectives on the Scientific Revolution
  - Debating ideas of the Enlightenment with other thinkers
- Negative aspects showed trends in:
  - Not everyone participated
  - Not everyone seemed prepared with the background of their figure
  - Not everyone stayed on track
- The “easiest” part of the salon was “sitting back and listening to others’ opinions” (Donna)

## **2. Fishbowl**

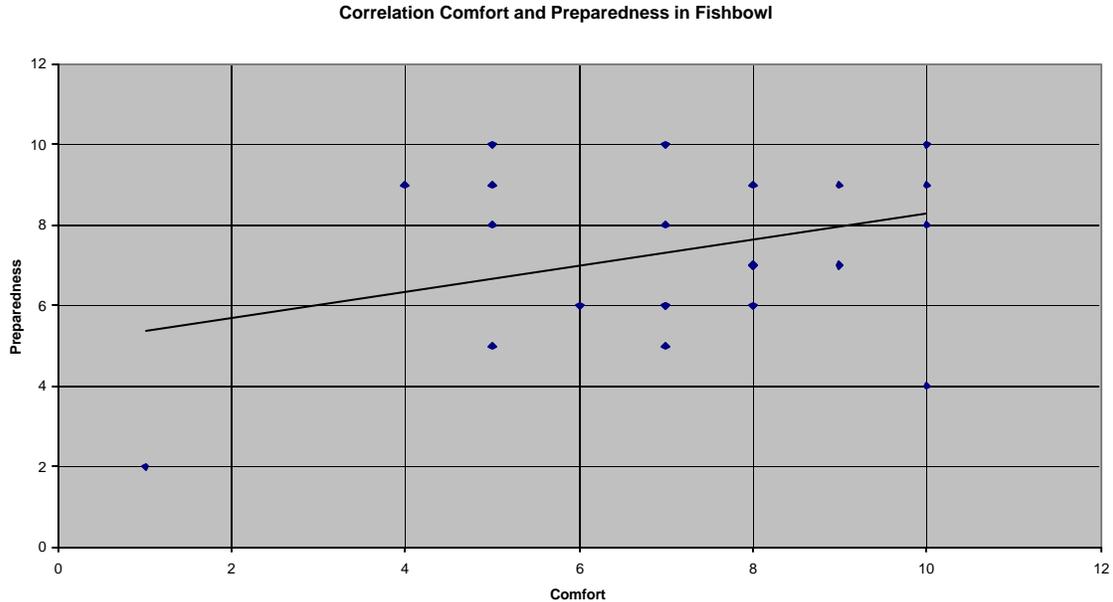
Students were asked after the fishbowl conversation:

- Did you choose to go in/were you chosen to go in/did you not go in the fishbowl conversation? Why?
- Describe the experience outside and inside the fishbowl.
- On a scale of 1 (not comfortable) to 10 (very comfortable), rate your comfort level with the fishbowl. Explain.
- On a scale of 1 (not at all prepared) to 10 (very prepared), rate how the primary source activity affected your preparedness for the fishbowl. Explain.
- Further comments...

I plotted the responses of my period 4 class to the fishbowl conversation. The results of comfort ratings and preparedness ratings follow:



The majority of this class felt both comfortable and prepared by using primary sources for the fishbowl discussion. More importantly, I wanted to understand if and how preparedness affected comfort. The following scatter diagram reflects this data:



There seems to be a correlation between high comfort (over 5) and feelings of more-than-adequate preparedness (over 5). Even more telling than the correlation are the following reflections from students in all three of the World Studies classes. The first quote refers to comfort, while the second to preparedness. Both are attributed to the student named in parentheses. Students whose names are italicized participated in the fishbowl.

a. Low Comfort/ High Preparedness

“I just didn’t like how people were losing focus of discussion.” // “They had a lot to do with the conversation, when people weren’t getting off track.” (Kristen)

“I don’t like to get in front of people.” // “The primary sources helped to prove your point and give insight to what was going on and what was being discussed.” (Deirdre)

b. High Comfort/ High Preparedness

“I like fishbowl because it’s not really a group thing but you still are seen and heard.” // “The sources helped because it gave you a basis/solid base of a conversation.” (Lavie)

“I was very comfortable in the fishbowl.” // “I felt well prepared for the discussion because the ones I read heled each other out which ensured how true it was.” (*Juanita*)

c. Low Comfort/ Low Preparedness

“Not a fan at all.” // “They didn’t prepare me at all. I always tried to find a meaning and I kept straying off the topics.” (Reese)

d. Mid-range Comfort / Mid-range Preparedness

“I was 7 because I got to choose when I could voice my opinion.” // “The sources were 5 because the fishbowl topic sometimes got way off topic.” (*Adrienne*)

### 3. Online Forum

After the internet classroom discussion, students were asked to openly reflect on the nicenet.org discussion experience. Below appears an overview of what a threaded discussion looks like:

- [The "Block" A.K.A. The Blockade](#) – CAB - 03/16/04 12:36 PM GMT -06:00 [[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]
  - [no subject](#) - DBT - 03/16/04 12:50 PM GMT -06:00 [[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]
  - [no subject](#) - SCS - 03/16/04 12:43 PM GMT -06:00 [[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]
  - [no subject](#) - DBT - 03/16/04 12:43 PM GMT -06:00 [[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]
  - [Rebuttal to the Block](#) - SCS - 03/16/04 12:41 PM GMT -06:00 [[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]
- [Cuba](#) - FXZ - 03/16/04 12:32 PM GMT -06:00 [[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]
- [no subject](#) - BHY - 03/16/04 12:27 PM GMT -06:00 [[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]
  - [no subject](#) - RTS - 03/16/04 12:37 PM GMT -06:00 [[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]
  - [no subject](#) - ADV - 03/16/04 12:36 PM GMT -06:00 [[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]
  - [no subject](#) - JAH - 03/16/04 12:33 PM GMT -06:00 [[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]
  - [no subject](#) - KAH - 03/16/04 12:14 PM GMT -06:00 [[Edit](#) |

Here, an excerpt from a discussion appears:

**FROM:** CAB (03/16/04)

**SUBJECT:** The "Block" A.K.A. The Blockade

Havanna's top pediatric hospital has a waiting list of operations because they are only able to operate on at the most 500 patients per year. Before the trade embargo, they used to do 500 or more operations per year. They decreased the number of operations to 50 or 60 percent. Even students from Lenin High School want the embargo to be lifted. They blame the trade embargo that has been placed on Cuba for the reason why Cuba hasn't become a richer country. I believe the trade embargo should be lifted for these reasons; when children in a pediatric hospital die from not being able to be operated on, I believe "it" should be lifted, soon. Another reason to lift "it" would be the students at Lenin High; when they can see that the embargo is hurting their society, then I believe they're seeing something we're not, evidently. **4 REPLIES** [[Hide Replies](#)]

**FROM:** SCS (03/16/04)

**SUBJECT:** Rebuttal to the Block

[[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]

You did your hmwk, little CAB, but if the embargo was hurting Cuba wouldn't they have done something, oh let's say a few years after it. Why wouldn't they have already lifted it???

**FROM:** DBT (03/16/04)

**SUBJECT:**

[[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]

well i personally havent found them yet but there has to be a reason to why they needed a trade embargo, maybe pride or something but i agree that they need to let it go and lift the trade embargo. But then again for every action there's a reaction so if they decided to lift the embargo latin america and the United states can probably find themselves suffering

**FROM:** SCS (03/16/04)

**SUBJECT:**

[\[Edit\]](#) | [\[Delete\]](#)

That's what I thought CAB

**FROM:** DBT (03/16/04)

**SUBJECT:**

[\[Edit\]](#) | [\[Delete\]](#)

i mean yeah the embargo is having a bad effect on Latin America but when you think about it, it has to have a purpose, BUT my opinion is that the united states should also lift this embargo because it would be helping Cuba. but we also have to think about what all of the negative effects are that can come from that

Students (even those who sit right next to each other) are able to post original messages or respond to others' ideas without oral discussion. The threaded discussion gives a visual structure to how questions are posed, responses are made, and new questions arise. Overall, students found the activity interesting and wanted to have a nicenet conversation in the future. From student reflections, particular trends are noted:

- The use of pbs.org/newshour articles on Cuba-U.S. relations before and during the conversation enabled many students to feel prepared for discussion.
- Many students noted that the time to think about an answer helped them participate.
- Students found that they "heard" the opinions of many students who do not participate orally in class.
- Some students found the threaded conversation difficult to follow and felt that they were confused "catching up" to the conversation as they responded, or that their responses were "too late" in the conversation flow.

#### B. Teacher Observation and Reflections

The second tool for data collection and analysis was my own observation of and reflection on my class discussion-based activities. I wanted to see not only how students perceived discussions, but also how I planned them, prepared for them, executed them, and reflected on them. I wondered if my own evaluation of discussions would correlate with the students' perspectives, and I was curious about what my findings might mean.

Throughout the above six activities, I mapped discussions using a sociogram (see appendix A). I looked for participation, content covered, and patterns of discussion (who questioned whom, who brought up new points). For the fishbowl activity in particular, the sociogram shows how many students participated, their patterns of participation with other group members, and for how many rounds they stayed in the fishbowl. The sociogram was compared to student individual reflections. Some correlation between participation and comfort could be found. For example, almost 100% of students exhibiting "low comfort" with the activity did not enter the discussion. Of those who did enter the fishbowl, a wider range of comfort levels can be seen. However, students both participating in the discussion and choosing to stay out of the fishbowl discussion overall felt prepared with their primary sources.

In relation to my questions for this research, my focus over the year has been more on the method of discussion than the content covered. For example, my journal entries after the Cold War Yalta Conference simulation include observations about Andriana C., who was able to push along her group's discussion through her enthusiasm throughout the entire class period. In addition, I observed that my period 7 class as a whole made a huge breakthrough in committing to and following through on discussion at this time. The journal entries are not as effective as I would have liked because I was looking for broad themes rather than individual progress. I would like to look back on my entries again and ask: were the goals of my class met through this form of discussion? I would like to focus on the content of discussion more, since I think the process aspect has been more of my vision and the students' vision in this project.

On that note, my journal does reflect that students seemed to understand more of the content covered, and thus achieve better discussions, when they utilize sources (primary, articles) *throughout* their discussion. This was apparent during the fishbowl, with the use of a variety of primary sources related to the same question, and the nicenet discussion when students referred back to their pbs.org/newshour site at any time in the discussion. Journal observations such as "Dominique flips back and forth to the articles while composing her response" show that the reference material is at least being utilized. Students did not necessarily read the same sources, but had a common base of information beyond the textbook or notes. Thus, they could contribute original ideas, query each other, and lead the discussion in their own ways, achieving what is, in this teacher's mind, a "good" discussion related to content.

My journal reflections relate to much of the published research regarding Social Studies classrooms and group discussions. Elizabeth Cohen's study, "Can Groups Learn?" finds that knowing evaluation criteria is a primary factor in improving group products (Cohen1045), and in my reflections I find that students are in many ways more concerned with the process of discussion rather than the outcomes. For example, in the online forum, I focus more on student use of sources while they "converse" because that's what I saw students do, that's what they asked about most, that's the emphasis I placed on the discussion. My form of evaluation isn't the number of times a student participates but how they use sources and respond to others' ideas. Perhaps if I had focused more on outcomes a graded discussion would have helped my students achieve a particular level of participation. However, I find that developing the process of using a primary source to support an interpretation lends itself much better to the best practice goals of Social Studies than an outcomes-based evaluation. In order to "increase student decision making and participation in wider social, political, and economic affairs" one must "increase use of evaluation that involves further learning and that promotes responsible citizenship and open expression of ideas" (Daniels 155). When evaluation criteria focuses on process as well as product, the student and teacher are expanding their levels of best practices.

### C. Student "Interviews"

The last research tool I used followed the U.N. Crisis Simulation. In groups of three, students participated on a number of levels simultaneously: through an

online forum, through written communication, and via group discussion. Students served as ambassadors and ran their own discussions at various points throughout the 96-minute block period. All three data tools were used in analyzing this one discussion-based activity. Individual students will reflect on the process and their role in the simulation when it concludes. I also reflected on what seemed to me the culmination of the year in discussion-based activities. In my notes, they are independent, rarely seeking assistance from me; they are invested in discussion, trying to resolve their issues; they are respectful of others, abiding by the rules of civil discussion as laid out by a student facilitator. Finally, a group of four students gathered for “interviews” about the discussion, but ended up running their own discussion guided by my one question: “What happened today at the U.N. Crisis Simulation?”

Alison tried to figure out why “There was nothing more exciting” and pondered that people acted like it was real and maybe felt competitive about the process. Briana called it a “partial reality” and thought it was “fun to see how people come together and form a plan”. When Jamie started talking, discussion – not response to teachers – commenced. She loved how in five minutes the countries hated each other and five minutes later they were allies again. She thought it was not so realistic but “putting in our own ideas makes it more fun”. Ali added, “it’s creating our own history,” and Briana joined in, “We’re using our imagination.” As James described how information moves fast in the simulation, the students took off again, making eye contact with each other, giving nonverbal cues of assent in nods and smiles. They moved on to how to improve the discussion, including using other reference tools like world maps and noting that nicenet is great for having a record of the proceedings handy. The students unanimously declared it a good activity, and the ambassador proceedings a good discussion, while they were having a good discussion themselves and explaining how best they could be prepared for this kind of activity.

The purpose of this data tool was to collect information regarding students’ perceptions of a discussion. What is the best part of this tool is that the students modeled a good discussion, adding to the data by the very form of their response. In addition, without prompting they sought to explain how they could improve discussion through preparation. They intuitively answer the subquestions that guide my research and my planning of my discussion-based activities. As is apparent, students and teachers can be and often are in agreement about what it takes to have a good discussion and what it looks like or feels like when one is practiced.

### *Analysis and Interpretation*

With eighty-eight individuals of diverse background and preparation entering high school, a variety of experiences in and reactions to discussion in a Social Studies class is not surprising. One struggle in this research was determining which would be most useful: emphasizing the distinct experiences of particular individuals in discussion, presenting a student as representative of others’ experiences, or presenting “trends” in student reflections on discussion. A combination of these approaches is presented in the data above, and this allows for the following points to be revealed:

1. Students identify a range of roles that are possible for them to play in a discussion. Students distinguish between productive and counterproductive roles in a discussion. They allow for engaged listening to be a productive role in discussion, but most define active participation as speaking intelligently on a topic. Speaking without relation to or reflection on the topic is viewed as counterproductive to a good discussion. (supported by Student Reflections, baseline questions)
2. Peer perceptions are on the minds of most students participating in a discussion. Knowledge of a topic as well as respect of others concerns students and in part determines what roles they will play in a discussion. (supported by Student Reflections, baseline questions)
3. Students who lead discussions experience more intense frustrations with their classmates than those acting as participants without a defined leadership role. These students may gain a more specific insight into what makes a good discussion, (or they may be turned off to discussion entirely?) (supported by Student Reflections, Salon)
4. Students appreciate the opinions of those who do not always participate orally, as seen in the nicenet online discussion. A different forum for discussion is favorable to the majority of the class, partly for this reason, and probably partly for the novelty of this method. (supported by Student Reflections, Online Forum and by Student Interviews, Crisis)
5. The process of discussion is more of a student's focus than the content of a discussion. Reflections are consistently related to how a discussion "felt" versus what information was covered in the discussion itself. (supported by Student Reflections) A shift from reflecting on the process of discussion to the content of discussion became increasingly important as seen in the Student Interviews, when the content and process of discussion were inextricably linked in a simulation.
6. Teachers focus on content as well as process in discussion activities. Being able to effectively combine the two goals is a primary concern in Social Studies classes. (supported by Teacher Observation and Reflection)
7. Though 5 and 6 above make it seem as if there is a divide between student and teacher perception of discussions, **what makes a "good" discussion for a teacher and a student is not incompatible.** Preparedness, flow of conversation, and covering content are identifiable aspects of "good" discussions for both teachers and students. (supported by comparing Student Reflection and Teacher Reflection)
8. Students and teachers alike identify preparation as a key to a good and comfortable discussion. Reliance on resources available for reference

throughout the discussion enhances feelings of comfort and preparedness for many students. (supported by Student Interviews)

9. The quality of a discussion directly relates to preparedness in content as well as practice in method of discussion for both students and teachers. (supported by all three data collection tools)

*Implications: Classroom Practice and Policy*

When I started inquiring into the processes of discussion in my classroom, I was very much motivated by the desire to make students aware of the various modes of class participation, and their ability to participate in class. Over the year, my focus shifted slightly to incorporate much more content in discussion-based activities. I attempted to find the most effective methods for students to understand content. Discussion-based activities are useful for this in the Social Studies.

For my own classroom practice, this research helps me gain feedback from my students about how they can be prepared to discuss their own ideas, listen to each other critically, and respectfully respond to each other's interpretations. Students' perceptions of roles in discussion help me incorporate a variety of means of participation in discussion-based activities. I feel that my students have learned how to navigate discussions throughout the year while also acquiring content. However, I also feel that preparing them to lead class discussions earlier in the term will benefit them throughout the year. These findings will hopefully guide one part of my department's evaluation of our curriculum, benchmarks, and standards this summer. I have proposed a team meeting throughout the summer to revise our course offerings and map our curriculum to include what skills our students should be acquiring at each level of their study. I will propose that discussion process and content be a major part of the ninth grade curriculum.

For classroom practices on a larger scale, this study shows that students need to be prepared for classroom discussions in the Social Studies. This means that teachers must be prepared as well. Teachers must be prepared in content, using primary sources, materials that allow for interpretation, and ongoing debates. They must be prepared to use the resources that technology provides in gaining access to these sources, and they must be willing to find content that is "real" and pertinent to student interest in order to foster student curiosity and continued growth. Principals and administrators must provide access to these sources, from primary source books to internet access for students.

In addition, teachers and principals must be willing to truly practice the art of discussion, if it is indeed one of the foundations of democratic living. Best practices recommend to increase "student decision making and participation in wider social, political, and economic affairs, so that they share a sense of responsibility for the welfare of their school and community" (Daniels 155). By "integrat[ing] the social studies with other areas of the curriculum" and within school practices themselves, "good" discussions in terms of process will abound. This requires teacher training in discussion, school commitment to resources

such as internet sources, and a school culture that promotes independent thinking within a respectful, safe group setting.

In terms of larger policy, I would like to participate in Area 20 “Vertical Teaming,” which incorporates the lessons of middle school teachers and a stream of high school teachers to prepare students for the rigors of Honors-level courses in high school. Tracking how Social Studies teachers use discussion-based activities throughout the middle and high school course of a student’s curriculum could potentially help student achievement in content as well as communication. Robert Gough has tracked for History professors, “What We Should Know about Precollegiate Learning,” and I recommend that elementary and high school Social Studies teachers understand each others’ curriculum and goals so that we improve student learning. In Area 20, we should be able to incorporate discussion-based activities at early ages, introduce primary sources and various interpretations in the primary grades, and diversify our modes of discussion to build on cooperative grouping for all ability levels. We should also be able to look at collegiate learning through a critical lens.

Gough writes, “Increasingly, even precollegiate students are being introduced to some types of historical thinking” (Gough 38). While his surprise is alarming (to what did he think they were introduced?), it is telling that teachers of Social Studies at various levels are unaware about each others’ practices. Best practices include “richer content in elementary grades” and “use of evaluation that involves further learning and that promotes responsible citizenship and open expression of ideas” (Daniels 155). Yet Gough notes that mid-terms, finals, and a term paper are the standard means of evaluation at the collegiate level. For what are we preparing students in the Social Studies? If we emphasize discussion at the primary and secondary level, are our students skills then withering at the collegiate level in terms of formal assessment? Teachers of History at all levels should be discussing how we want our students to discuss, why we think this is important, and how we will implement discussion to meet our goals.

### *New Questions for Research*

With my initial research, I have several new questions to ask.

1. What preparation do students have in Social Studies discussion-based activities before entering their freshmen year?
2. What bridge between grade eight and freshmen year is necessary for all students to succeed in discussion-based activities?
3. What bridge between senior year and college is necessary for students to excel in the Social Studies?
4. How do students’ various backgrounds (educational, social, etc.) influence their reactions to discussion?
5. How do teachers of different subjects approach discussion-based activities?

In addition, I would like to incorporate revisions to my approach to this research. I would start in the Fall tracking student responses to discussion to gather more of a baseline sample of data. Furthermore, I would mirror my own journal

entries with student entries. By answering the same reflective questions as students, I can determine where our ideas of “good” discussions converge and where they diverge. In addition, I would like to standardize some of my reflections for discussions. After every discussion-based activity, I would ask: how has this activity developed the students’ content knowledge and method mastery?

In terms of format for research, I think that tracking particular students would be helpful after this broader study of entire classes. After identifying and tracking particular students’ discussion patterns, I would present my findings in narrative, case-study form rather than chunks of discrete data. Discussions bounce around classrooms, and students bounce around ideas in discussions; I think a format that reflects this less-than-neat learning activity would best suit my future studies.

## Annotated Bibliography

Daniels, Harvey, *et.al.* Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann) 1998.

Daniels, Zemelman, and Hyde use case studies and research to illustrate how best practices can be implemented in each of the subject areas. For Social Studies, they recommend increased critical thinking skills, increased student choice in study, increased interpretation rather than rote memorization.

In regards to my research, this reference

- a) encouraged me to understand my discussion-based activities as part of a larger discussion on classroom practice and school policy, rather than the result of single classroom experience.
- b) enabled me to make connections between goals and assessments in the Social Studies.
- c) allowed me to establish a framework for connections amongst teachers of History at all school levels.

Gough, Robert J. , "What We Should Know about Precollegiate Learning," *Perspectives: Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* (January 2004) 42:1, 37-39.

Gough uses over 300 observation visits to detail for the History professor what a high school history class looks like. He notes the gaps between what collegiate level instructors require of students and their preparation from secondary school. He makes particular mention of research and assessment, but does not tackle discussion-based activities.

In regards to my own research, this reference

- a) reflected my interest in communication between primary and secondary school teachers concerning discussion methods as used in the Social Studies.
- b) redirected my interest in discussion-based activities to the collegiate level, inspiring me to question, "for what are we preparing students in the Social Studies"? If, as researchers below write, we are preparing students for democratic living, why are discussions not assessed in the collegiate environment? Why are group projects taboo? How are students interacting beyond their own critical thinking in research papers and midterms?

Hess, Diana and Julie Posselt, "How High School Students Experience and Learn from the Discussion of Controversial Public Issues," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* (Summer 2002) 17:4, 283-314.

Hess and Posselt of the University of Wisconsin-Madison researched a tenth-grade Social Studies class in which the objective was to improve students'

abilities to participate in discussion centered around controversial public issues (CPI). The authors used pre- and post-surveys of students regarding their participation in discussion, interviews of select students, videos of scored discussions, and comparisons of teacher-scored discussions and outside evaluators' scores of the same discussions. The researchers' compilation and interpretation of data reflected several gaps: 1) between teachers' goals and the achievement of those goals by all students in the class, 2) between student perceptions of their participation in discussion and their participation as evaluated by their teachers, 3) between teacher evaluations of students and outside evaluations of students, and 4) among students, regarding the importance of discussion in a classroom situation.

In regards to my own research, this reference

- a) provided a connection to a published questionnaire regarding students' perceptions of class discussions and their roles as participants in discussion. I intend to adapt and use the survey from Francis', Wade's, and Schwingle's earlier studies in my own research. In addition, I will read and refer to their studies as I continue my own.
- b) modeled a research and presentation method I will consider for my own research. Highlighting the different perspectives of three students within their study made the CPI classroom experience a known entity. I am attempting to focus on the student perspective in my own study, and am considering several ways to present this information.
- c) spurred my thoughts concerning the motivation for teachers to emphasize class participation. The authors discuss the idea of a "democratic" education, a common justification for requiring class participation. They contrast various definitions of democracy as a way to open their inquiry into classroom discussion in the Social Studies. I intend to consider more deeply both the teacher's and student's understandings of why class participation is a common requirement in the Social Studies classroom.

Cohen, Elizabeth G, et al. "Can Groups Learn?" *Teachers College Record* (September 2002) 104:6, 1045-1068.

Researchers from Stanford University test the idea that giving students specific evaluation criteria will improve both "the character" of a group discussion as well as "the quality" of a group product. By analyzing audiotapes from three of five days of group conversation, recording the final presentations produced by groups, and reviewing individual reflections on the unit, researchers hoped to test three main hypotheses:

- 1) Using evaluation criteria will lead to more task-focused talk in groups; will influence better group products; and will be linked to higher scores on final written assessments.

- 2) When the written and group product match the content and concepts of group tasks, and when the group product requires interdependence of group members, the higher quality group product will lead to higher average scores for the written assessment.
- 3) A better quality group discussion and product will lead to a better individual performance of group members.

The researchers found that “groups can learn”. Individuals achieved within and beyond the group. Knowing the criteria for evaluation helped groups self-evaluate throughout their planning; however, teaching students how to use the evaluation criteria was an important step for student achievement.

In regards to my own research, this reference

- a) brought to light the ideas of accountability in building group discussions. Ensuring that the assessment supports the learning process (1067), is an important consideration in Social Studies class discussions.
- b) showed how to distinguish between individual and group achievement, and yet understand the relationship between the two. Multiple assessments allowed the researchers to see individuals worked within a group, how groups performed as a unit, and how individuals achieved after group discussion. Finding these links between individuals and groups is important to my own research as well.

Wilen, William W. “Exploring Myths about Teacher Questioning in the Social Studies Classroom,” *The Social Studies* (Jan/Feb 2001) 26-32.

Professor Wilen of Kent State’s Department of Teaching, Leadership, and Curriculum Development asks the question, “What decisions can teachers make to improve their students’ oral participation in class?” He uses an eighth grade Social Studies teacher’s concerns for his class as a means to explore nine “myths” about classroom discussions. By exploring myths such as “higher-level cognitive questions elicit higher-level answers” and “when questioning students, teachers should call only on volunteering students,” Wilen hopes to enable teachers to make decisions that will improve their questioning practices.

In regards to my own research, this reference

- a) clearly formats a way to present information. Not exactly action research, Wilen’s article still makes observations of classroom practices applicable to a wide audience of teachers. His outline of explaining the myth, describing the “endorsed principle” and showing an “application” models how a teacher can effectively move from practice to better practice.
- b) like Hess’ article above, notes that practicing for active civic life is a motivation for discussions in Social Studies classrooms. Wilen does not make a major point of this, but mentions that “[a] basic requirement of effective citizenship is that thought precedes action” in his section on “wait time” (29). I find this interesting because it seems

that many teachers use the justification of democratic practices for using class discussions. I wonder if this is an appropriate justification and how students see this motivation.

Larson, Bruce E. "Influences on Social Studies Teachers' Use of Classroom Discussion," *The Clearing House* (January/February 2000) 73:3, 174-181.

In this article, reprinted from the May/June 1999 issue of *The Social Studies*, Professor Larson of Western Washington University builds upon his previous research to determine the influences affecting teachers' use of discussion. By examining six high school Social Studies teachers' classes, interviewing the teachers themselves, and using teachers' responses to vignettes detailing various class discussions, Wilen determined that five factors influence teachers' different conceptions of discussion: 1) student diversity, 2) lesson objectives, 3) age and maturity of students, 4) sense of community in the classroom, and 5) interest level of students.

In regards to my research, this reference

- a) elaborates on the motivations for teachers to use discussion in the Social Studies classroom, particularly highlighting the idea of civic engagement and democratic life as a propelling force in discussion planning (175).
- b) highlights the importance of a teacher-based perspective on the planning of discussions. I have been very much convinced that a student's perspective on discussion is essential to my own research, yet I see through this study how a teacher's perspective also adds to the "conversation" on "discussion".