

The Positive Effect of Debate Inside the Social Studies Classroom

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Abstract: For far too long social studies classrooms have been missing a key aspect to bring classroom participation into instruction. The social studies classroom has been teacher-centered with an abundance of text to read and comprehend with little focus on bringing the students' experiences and thoughts into the discussion. The social studies classroom is one that needs to prepare students for their civic duties outside of the classroom. This process begins with the students being able to form thoughts and opinions about topics to communicate to others. The strategy of using discussion questions that can lead to debate will also lead students to have a higher level of participation leading to better comprehension.

Introduction

What we as professional educators know about the classroom learning experience is that students actively participating in the content has the possibility to lead to better comprehension of the material. This possibility rings true in the social studies classroom as well. The beauty of the social studies classroom is that educators can allow students to bring their societal influences into the lesson to get them a deeper understanding of the material. More so than any other content area, the social studies content area brings in subject matter that can have a different meaning based on a student's race, sexual orientation, religion, and/or nationality. Allowing students to lead the discussion surrounding a subject at hand can open the door to others having a better understanding of how the topics are portrayed by others. All of this leads to the possibility of students having a deeper understanding of the material.

Why has debate around the content not been more widely used throughout the social studies classroom though? As Zorwick & Wade (2016) mentioned, "different positions are identified, and a clash of ideas is encouraged, thereby inviting a closer examination of the arguments and reasoning presented" (p. 436). Students having these different positions, viewpoints, and understanding of topics can lead to a deeper examination of the topic. This is exactly what social studies educators should be striving for, a classroom with debate using facts and concepts while drawing from the students' backgrounds. Social studies educators are also trying to prepare students for their civic duties outside of the classroom. By having a classroom with debate using facts and concepts can ultimately begin preparing students for these duties outside of the classroom.

Increasing Comprehension and Active Participation Through Debate

Imagine students being presented the topic of the Bill of Rights and being asked to create a debate around the topic using only the facts and concepts found in the course textbook and what the teacher communicated in his lecture. The way the

material is presented in the textbook or lecture may cause some students to struggle with an understanding of the topic. Student learning style may also limit the understanding of some students. Other students may struggle to see how this is beneficial to them outside of the classroom. Now imagine a classroom where the students are invited to debate the same topic, but they are allowed to go beyond the textbook to include insights and information from their background and prior knowledge to formulate their debate about the topic. Understanding how, for example, the fourth amendment can help a student if they are pulled over driving down the road or if a police officer comes to their home to search their house. Using real-life scenarios and students' societal influences to help paint the picture of the content within argumentation and debate has the possibilities of increased student participation and better comprehension. In my limited classroom experience in an urban education school, I used this technique to increase student's participation and it resulted in better comprehension of the content during formative assessment. Students had an increased understanding by drawing from real-life experiences and applying them to the content that was being covered. The arguments, discussion, and debate would sometimes become heated or off topic by using societal backgrounds, but as a teacher my job was to steer the discussion back in the correct direction. This form of instruction showed signs of increased student participation and comprehension. The research shows the same benefits as what I found implementing this form of instruction in my classroom.

Student involvement can play a large role in how students comprehend and participate with the content. Including the students in debate can lead to an actively engaged classroom which has the possibility to lead to higher-levels of critical thinking. Zorwick & Wade (2016) stated in their study on civic education using debate, "a teacher can create a dynamic exchange that promotes critical thinking for its participants, both as speakers and as listeners" (p. 436). Using debate and argumentation in the social studies classroom allows students to choose a side, defend it and as a result, come to a better understanding of the material being presented.

Activating Higher-Level Thinking with Debate

In the field of social studies education, the National Council for the Social Studies has a lot to say as to how an effective classroom is developed. Leslie Duhaylongsod (2017) of Salem State University states that "the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) supports the use of debate in both middle and high school classrooms" (p. 100). The NCSS is backing the use of debate due to research and studies to show the effectiveness of the activity. The NCSS states "students learn from value-based reasoning when addressing problems and issues" (Duhaylongsod, 2017, p. 100). Duhaylongsod (2017) used debates in the classroom for her research using the "Catalyzing Comprehension Through Discussion and Debate Research Project" as a benchmark to show the possible benefits of debate and discussion in the Social Studies classroom (p. 102). She presented multiple activities over four sessions to present facts about Ancient Egypt and on the fifth day had the students debate using the facts and concepts learned throughout the unit. Through her research she found that middle school students "are capable of academic argumentation in classroom debates on topics in social studies" (Duhaylongsod, 2017, p. 113). Her

findings also showed that students were able to support their claims with evidence, thus leading the students to a higher-level thinking about the topics being debated (Duhaylonsod, 2017 p. 108).

Using Student's Background in Debate

Using debate as a part of the social studies classroom can also allow students to bring their ideas and background into the lesson. This also is a reason as to why some teachers are reluctant to use debate in their classroom. According to Stephen J. Thornton (1994) of Columbia University, allowing backgrounds to come into the student's discussion and debate will begin "connecting students' experience and the curriculum, providing at least some opportunity for students to construct meanings for themselves, allowing for possibility, even the likelihood, that different students will take away different understandings from a lesson, and questioning students' taken-for-granted views of the world" (p. 23). By doing this it provides the opportunity to enhance student learning experiences. Sullivan et al. (2015) stated that "when students were engaged in learning and saw clear connections between the history content and their own interests, they wanted to participate in class discussions" (p. 38). Giving students a voice within the instruction of social studies and allowing them to tie their experiences back to the material has the potential to enhance engagement and comprehension.

Allowing students to use their experiences in the discussion can also help explain the material within multiple perspectives. As Bruce Larson (1999) discussed in his finding on discussion in a diverse classroom, he mentioned that "teachers consider student diversity – in areas such as cultural background, ethnicity, gender, race, learning styles, and ability – both positively and negatively" (p. 176). There are some teachers that may be hesitant to use discussion and debate in the classroom due to opposing views based on background within the classroom. Teachers need to have control over the classroom to ensure the discussion or debate stays on topic and that students are using facts and concepts within the lesson to form the arguments being presented. When this is done properly and effectively, diversity and background can bring other perspectives into the discussion. Within Larson's (1999) research, multiple teachers mentioned that "a diverse classroom could be the only place students will hear perspectives and opinions that differ from their own point of view" (p. 176). One of the main objectives as a social studies educator is to prepare students to be active participants within their civic duties, so by hearing multiple perspectives the teacher will be preparing them for this participation outside of the classroom. Learning from multiple perspectives helps students see the whole picture of the content being taught to the class.

Beginning Debate Early

Engaging critical thinking and higher-level thinking needs to begin at a young age within the social studies classroom. Ochoa-Becker et al. (2001) performed a study that looked at critical thinking and decision making with young children to see the benefits that they have in our democracy. The observations occurred within the classroom while covering controversial topics within the social studies content area

such as slavery and the Civil War. A fifth-grade teacher split students up between the north and south when discussing the Civil War to try and compromise to avoid conflict (Ochoa-Becker et al., 2001, pp. 267-268). They found that by doing this and creating debate between the two groups “the children responded vigorously, and a strong discussion followed that included higher-level thinking on the part of the children” (Ochoa-Becker et al., 2001, p. 268). The conclusion of their studies of different teaching practices and strategies showed that “critical thinking was encouraged on an on-going basis by debates, dilemmas, open-ended children’s stories and questions-asking activities” (Ochoa-Becker et al., 2001, p. 282).

Early childhood students were able to activate critical thinking during debate with one another, which helps show the benefits of using discussion and debates to encourage comprehension. Starting this form of instruction at a young age will also “build a foundation for critical thinking and decision making that can be developed further in later grades” (Ochoa-Becker et al., 2001, p. 285). Creating a classroom environment that encourages student-student interaction at an early age creates the foundation for this form of engagement throughout the school experience. Teachers implementing debate early on will also set the foundation for students to continue with active participation to lead to better comprehension of content as they continue to higher grades in school.

Debate Leads to Higher-Level Thinking

Ultimately, educators strive to challenge students to think outside of the box and to apply the facts and concepts that are being covered. The research shows that debate has the potential to enhance students critical and higher-level thinking when discussing the content. Challenging students to apply the concepts and create an argument is a valuable tool to increase active participation within the classroom. This form of learning is backed by Bloom’s Taxonomy, which consists of the lowest level of learning as remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, up to the highest level creating (Bloom, 1956). Jagers (2013) used Bloom’s Taxonomy to research the effectiveness of debate in the classroom. In her research debate is looked at as “a powerful learning tool for promoting classroom interaction and the developments of skills such as communication, argument-construction, discussion, and critical analysis” (Jagers, 2013, p. 39). As student’s progress upward on Bloom’s hierarchy, the cognitive and affective domains begin to overlap (Jagers, 2013, p. 39), showing the benefits of incorporating debate in the classroom.

Debate in the classroom has a lot of benefits for the students, including having the “potential to enhance critical and creative thinking as well as reasoning, communication skills and problem-solving skills” (Zare & Othman, 2013, p. 1507). Being able to form arguments to be used in the classroom debate by including students’ prior knowledge is beneficial. Students need to look back on the facts and concepts that were presented about a topic to form the ideas used in debate. “Analysis of the data shows that classroom debates helped the learners get involved in the intellectual practices which illustrate critical thinking skills” (Zare & Othman, 2013, p. 1508). By observing the student’s involvement and participation in the debates, teachers can have an idea of how well students are comprehending the material be-

ing covered in the given unit. If students are arguing without facts and concepts, the teacher will know that more information needs to be covered and discussed.

Conclusion

Debate can lead to a student better understanding the material being covered. Within the social studies content area far too often students aren't actively participating, so implementing debate as a form of instruction allows students to have a larger role in the classroom. All of the research presented shows that this has a positive effect on the student's comprehension of the materials. It also gives students the ability to bring their background into the conversation to help them apply the concepts. All of these aspects of debate show that it is an effective form of instruction within the social studies classroom to draw out the different meaning and understanding of students of different races, sexual orientation, religion, or nationality.

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About the Author

John Poddany received his BSBA in Marketing from BGSU in 2009. After 13 years in business, he is returning to his passion of education. In August 2021, he received his Master of Education from UToledo and will begin in the fall of 2021 at Bedford High School teaching US History.