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## “This is Our Time to Find Our Voice”: Doing Discussion in the Elementary Social Studies Classroom

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### Abstract

In this article, a teacher educator and a teacher candidate collectively address discussion in the elementary social studies classroom. In the first portion of the article, the teacher educator describes how they teach their future elementary social studies teachers to have their students engage in discussion by introducing a discussion model around children’s literature. The teacher candidate then describes how they took what they learned from their elementary social studies methods course and implemented it in a fourth-grade classroom. The authors then conclude by discussing key learnings and conclusions that are applicable to the social studies classroom.

**Keywords:** Discussion; elementary social studies; theory to practice; children’s literature

Discussion is arguably a core practice of the social studies classroom (Fogo, 2014) and yet it is a rarity (Hess, 2004). Many teachers avoid discussion, especially in regard to political issues, because it is easy for the conversation to be diverted and many teachers may fear losing control (Hess, 2004). While those fears are valid, there is too much value in discussion to avoid it, especially in the social studies classroom. So, then many teachers are left in an either-or scenario of whether discussion is worth it or if it causes more trouble than it is worth. Discussion is definitely worth it because within a discussion, students are able to gain valuable skills that will enable them to be better citizens within a democracy (Mullins, 2019). Discussion skills are not innate, however, but have to be taught explicitly and specifically to ensure that students have the skills necessary to engage in a productive discussion.

One way to approach teaching such skills is by starting with non-controversial topics and focus on building certain dispositions prior to asking students to engage in complex political discussions. As such, in this article we (a teacher educator and a teacher candidate) are going to address discussion in the elementary social studies classroom. In the first portion of the article, the teacher educator is going to present how they teach their future elementary social studies teachers to have their students engage in discussion by introducing a discussion model around Dr. Seuss’ *The Lorax*. Following that, the teacher candidate will discuss how they took what they learned from their elementary social studies methods course and implemented it in a fourth-grade classroom. We will then discuss key “take-aways” that have been learned through this process that we hope will be of use to future teachers.

## From Methods Class to the Classroom

### Context of the Methods Classroom

The elementary methods classroom on which this article is focused, takes place the semester before the students go into student teaching. All students enrolled in this methods course are working towards an undergraduate degree in order to be able to teach at the elementary level. During the methods semester, students are required to achieve at least 80 hours of classroom teaching time. Because of this, the course only meets for 10 sessions, so the students have time to complete their field experience hours. The students in this course also take several other methods courses, including science methods, English Language Arts methods, as well as math methods. This article is focused specifically on the teaching that occurred in the social studies portion of the methods experience.

### Elementary Social Studies Methods: Teaching Discussion

Most days in the undergraduate social studies methods course I teach, I model a core social studies practice (Fogo, 2014), and then have my teacher candidates deconstruct my lesson to identify different ways in which the practice could be applied in the grade-level in which they are placed that semester. Since we usually have 10 or less methods course meetings, I have to be deliberate in decision making in terms of what content I offer the teacher candidates. Due to the importance of discussion, we dedicate a whole class on how to facilitate discussion in the social studies classroom. I do this through examining Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax*. There is no shortage of activities surrounding *The Lorax*, as lessons have been developed around this book in a variety of ways, ranging from environmental issues (American Forest Foundation, 2012) to critical thinking issues around childrens' philosophy (University of Washington Center for Philosophy for Children, 2020) and more. However, I use the book as a focal point around which I model how to teach discussion skills in social studies.

On the day we do discussion, I start the class, by posing the question, "Have you made a choice today?" After a few teacher candidates volunteer, I then pose the following question, "To what extent do you agree with the following statement, "The choices I make influence others."

- If you agree, stand in the front left corner of the room.
- If you mostly agree, stand in the middle of the room.
- If you disagree, stand in the right corner of the room.

At this point, I ask the teacher candidates reasons for their choices, and give them an opportunity to shift their viewpoint based on the responses of others. This discussion usually takes around five minutes, at which point I have the teacher candidates go and sit down as I introduce Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*.

I then provide teacher candidates with a handout of *The Lorax*, available online in a variety of places (see [https://www.chrisrossarthur.com/uploads/3/8/5/9/38596187/dr.\\_seuss\\_the\\_loraxbokos-z1.pdf](https://www.chrisrossarthur.com/uploads/3/8/5/9/38596187/dr._seuss_the_loraxbokos-z1.pdf)). Then I show a YouTube reading of *The Lorax* (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdWesdMfyd4>). Within their document, they are to note specific instances when the Lorax made a choice, and then note when they see problems such as pollution. After the reading is completed, I number the teacher candidates into groups of ones and twos, with the ones being the Onclers and the twos being the Lorax. If they are in the Oncler group, their task is to prepare evidence from the reading that cutting down the trees was not wrong. If they are in the Lorax group, they have to prepare evidence from the text that cutting down the trees was wrong. At this point, each group has around 15 minutes to prepare their arguments. Directly before we discuss, I have the teacher candidates decide on a list of rules for discussion before we begin. The discussion that ensues is usually quite dramatic and intense, even though we are discussing a fictional book in a college classroom. I usually stop the discussion after about five minutes and have the teacher candidates prepare a personal reflection based on a prompt which allows them to decompress; the prompt is: “Notice in the last part of the story there is one seed left, so write a short story about what should be done with this last seed.” I usually have a few teacher candidates share before stopping and having them deconstruct the lesson. The teacher candidates are typically surprised that the class has been so tense, given that they had a discussion centered on a children’s book. They are also usually shocked that even a low-risk discussion has to have so much structure and preparation.

Following one of these classes, one of the teacher candidates approached me and told me they were going to teach this in their fourth-grade placement. As a teacher educator, it is always intriguing to see one of the practices you recommended actually be used in the classroom. Therefore, I asked the teacher candidate to collaborate with me as they taught it so we could fine-tune this approach and provide recommendations for other educators by providing a visible connection between theory and practice (Garrison, 2012). Therefore, in this next section we focus on this connection by providing a narrative from the perspective of the teacher candidate.

### **Context of My Fourth Grade Classroom**

The fourth-grade classroom in which this lesson took place was a very diverse group of students. The class was comprised of students of different races and ethnicities, students with varying socioeconomic backgrounds, and students with mixed ability levels. The school that this occurred in was located in a rural community. In the past, the classroom dynamic was teacher led/teacher focused prior to the lesson I taught on *The Lorax*. Students were typically asked questions and were not allowed to answer until the teacher acknowledged them. There was not much room for student collaboration and therefore, the students were not accustomed to open discussion. This was apparent towards the start of the lesson; however, as the lesson went on the students became more comfortable with the dynamic of open discussion. I will discuss the specifics of this in the next section.

## My Fourth Grade Classroom: Connecting Theory to Practice

When I taught discussion in the elementary classroom, I focused on the fourth grade Kentucky Social Studies Standard 4.I.U.E.3, “Develop claims with evidence to answer compelling and supporting questions” (Kentucky Department of Education, 2019, p. 78). I chose to introduce *The Lorax* on two different days. The day prior to the discussion, I read *The Lorax* to the students. Students discussed how they felt about the book and we identified “real world” issues discussed in the book such as, but not limited to, pollution, gentrification, and industrialism.

On the day of the discussion, I reviewed the key points in the book. I then had the students develop some rules of discussion to ensure the discussion had structure and that all the students felt safe. I felt like it was important for students to realize in order for a discussion to run smoothly, everyone needs to respect each other’s stance. I chose to assign the topics around which the discussion would focus. For example, I had the Oncler group focus on how their position related to building and creating communities and I had the Lorax group focus on a stance of anti-pollution. I informed each group they were tasked with developing three evidence-based arguments based on their group’s position. Each group elected a discussion leader to ensure that the discussion stayed focused and that everyone’s opinions were being heard. Other group roles included: scribe, spokesperson and timekeeper. These roles ensured that the group was being efficient and staying organized. Once students were finished, we came back to a whole group and started the discussion. I taught this lesson to three different fourth-grade classes. Although I had originally told students that they only had to create three evidence-based arguments, each class exceeded that. One class even developed 10 arguments. I realized that my classes could do more than I anticipated, so I challenged two of the classes to create counter arguments, which they did well. At the end of the discussion, I asked students a series of questions such as:

1. What would you do with the last seed?
2. Do you agree with the stance of the Lorax? Why or why not?
3. How did it feel being a member of a group you did not necessarily decide to be in? Did you change your mind as a result?

I asked these different types of questions to further perturb their thinking as well as to self-assess how the lesson went by asking for student perceptions of the lesson, as well as questions that allowed me to examine if what I taught was what they actually learned.

### Reflections from the Lesson

After teaching this lesson, I wrote reflections to capture how each lesson went and how it could be changed in future iterations. I also reflected on what I personally could have done better. One of the struggles I had was with prepping for the lesson because I wanted it to go as

smoothly as it went when I was the student in my methods class. This was my first lesson teaching in an upper elementary social studies class, and I was anxious. I was so anxious that I even practiced the lesson repeatedly a couple days before, making my roommates act like students so I could practice the lesson with them.

I also found it difficult to go into someone else's classroom and teach a lesson completely different from what the students receive on a regular basis. The fourth-grade students were not accustomed to open discussion. Additionally, in the lessons I observed, the host teacher did not give them adequate time to collaborate their thoughts. I was unsure of how the students would react to the change; I also was not prepared for how the host teacher would react either. Being a teacher candidate creates avenues of stress in many different capacities. For example, I wanted to teach a good lesson for the students, but I also felt like I had to perform a certain way to impress the host teacher. Additionally, in this lesson, I felt like I was not always in control, since I was a guest in the classroom. It was apparent the host teacher was not accustomed to leading this type of discussion. For example, she tried to intervene and guide the students into thinking a certain way about their given argument. However, I tried to guide the students to create their own thinking and collaborate with each other to build onto their thinking. Overall, I was happy about how the lesson went, but in the back of my mind, I would also resort back to feeling frustrated I did not have complete control.

I have learned that as a teacher candidate, you have to take initiative in the classroom while respecting the host teacher. One of the biggest "take-aways" I learned is that everyone has a different style and approach to teaching. Being a teacher candidate does not mean you have to follow in the exact footsteps of your host teacher. This is our time to find our voice and find the type of teacher we want to be. During this struggle, I was worried about how the changes would affect the students. However, I came to realize, in the classroom there are going to be multiple things with which you will struggle. For example, I struggle with confidence and constantly seeking approval. However, if your students are the focus and everything you do is to better yourself for your students, you will be successful.

### **Conclusions**

Taking a strategy from a methods class and applying it directly to the classroom allowed us to develop several key learnings that we believe is of value to future teacher educators and teacher candidates. First and foremost, strategies in methods courses look very different in the context of a clinical placement or student teaching. In many instances as teacher educators, it is easy to forget that the strategy being taught is not just going to be directly applied to the teacher candidates' own classroom, but the strategy is going to be applied to a classroom in which they are a guest. While the strategies learned in a methods course are applicable and practical, there are complexities associated with student teaching, which we must take into account. For example, since teacher candidates are guests in a classroom, they are trying to teach in an



environment they did not create, and in many instances, the pedagogy of the host teacher may stand in direct contrast to what is being taught at the university (Garrison, 2012).

Additionally, it is valuable for host teachers to know that many candidates feel as if they have to perform to the expectation of the teacher. Therefore, it would be valuable for the host teacher to have honest conversations about expectations and be transparent in that they do not expect a certain performance from the teacher candidate. Such open communication is key in ensuring a successful student teaching/clinical experience in the classroom.

Lastly, we hold that even amidst the struggles, there is still value in discussion and because of that, it should not be avoided (Hess, 2004). Teaching students how to discuss is a core practice in the social studies (Fogo, 2014) that needs to be emphasized, because “talk is not cheap” (Kettering, 1993, p. 2, as cited in Hess, 2002). However, such talk (i.e. discussion) within the social studies needs to be taught specifically and explicitly, and we see children’s literature, specifically *The Lorax*, as a good place to start the process.

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At the time of writing this article, **Molly Erwin** was an elementary teacher candidate at Eastern Kentucky University. She is now a teacher at Kenton Elementary School in Kentucky.

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