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Civic Development in Current Events Discussions

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1) Statement of the problem

Given that acquiring competencies for engaged and knowledgeable citizenship is a central goal of social studies education (NCSS, 2010), classroom teaching should support the development of robust civic belief formation and identities. Although current events discussions are a widespread feature of social studies classes (sometimes a regular, structured feature and sometimes informal and spontaneous), they are typically viewed as an “add-on” to the regular curriculum and as having little impact on student learning. Alarming, despite their ubiquity in social studies classrooms, little is known about the impact of current events discussions on students’ civic development. We propose that such discussions, when carefully designed, can have a powerful impact on the development of students’ civic beliefs and their identities as citizens.

This study will contribute a fine-grained empirical analysis of civic identity development as a communicated, socially-constructed achievement during current events discussions. In a research study currently underway in a local public high school, we examine the extent that senior students’ talk during weekly current events discussions supports their development of political-moral beliefs and the ability to persuasively reason using evidence for a position on contemporary civic issues, which are considered key competencies for civic identity development (Schiutema, Veugelers, & Ten Dam, 2009; Yates & Youniss, 2006). Framing the study with the concept of civic identity rests on an understanding of learning as the ways students use language to make sense of the world and to negotiation knowledge and beliefs about self based on their own values.

In light of this issue, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do current events discussions shape students’ development of civic beliefs and their ability for verbal and written evidence-based reasoning?
2. Does participation in current events discussions help students to strengthen and articulate their civic identities?

2) Theoretical/conceptual framework

Civic identity development is the theoretical framework used for this study. Students’ social, cultural, and learner identities have become increasingly common as conceptual and analytical lenses for analyzing classrooms interactions pertaining to teaching and learning (e.g. Dolby, 2000; Gee, 2000-01; Lee & Anderson, 2009). Drawing on this work, we aligned our approach with a conceptualization of identity as a socially constructed, communicated achievement, in contrast to essentialist views of identity (Lee & Anderson, 2009). A social constructionist view of identity conceives of it as a process rather than an attained status or object of study. We further understand identity as context-bound and framed within particular relations of power.

In the social studies classroom, identity takes on unique disciplinary qualities that engage how students learn to think of themselves as civic actors. We adopted a definition of civic identity as an individual’s self-perception of their role as a civic actor concerned with the common good (Youniss, et al., 2002). Because civic identity deals with the ways that individuals frame their role in a political community, which concerns ways of thinking about “who one is in relation to society” (Yates & Youniss, 1999, p. 273), it emphasizes the constructed nature of civic beliefs and attachments. Educators now consider civic identity, in addition to the traditional emphasis on knowledge, attitudes and skills, to be an essential component of civic learning (Myers, McBride, & Anderson, under review).

For our study, we focused on the ways classroom discourse mediates the formation of civic beliefs and reasoning, and how these support identity formation. Based on our reading of the literature, we believe that such discussions when carefully designed can create a discursive space for students to negotiate and build self-understandings as certain types of citizens. Particularly, guided classroom talk is increasingly understood as central to teaching that aims to facilitate critical thinking and the construction of beliefs and meanings about the

world (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). A key finding in this research is that classroom talk shapes students' identities, as Nasir and Kirshner (2003, p. 143) described: "It is as individuals interact and talk with one another that identities (moral and otherwise) are shaped." Discussion is important for identity development because it involves making meaning about who people are as civic actors and their inclination to participate in politics. Discussion exposes participants to new perspectives, requires that they grapple with complex political and historical issues, and encourages the negotiation and construction of meaning for the issues that take into account participants' life experiences. Research outside of formal schooling has also shown that discussion supports robust civic identity formation (Gastil, et al., 2002; Nygreen, 2008). Implicit within these practices are the reproduction of power through classroom talk and the emergence of student voices (Brookfield, 2004).

We consider the development of robust civic beliefs to be a fundamental aspect of civic identity because deliberating and taking a position on public issues is a fundamental activity of citizenship (Parker, 2006). Articulating beliefs requires placing oneself in the public arena by taking a stand and persuasively and articulately reasoning for a position on a controversial issue. However, discussion of any type is rare in social studies classrooms (Hess, 2009; Nystrand, et al., 1998). Furthermore, little work on the relationship between discussion and identity that is evident in other subject area disciplines has been undertaken in civic education. When discussion has been studied in social studies education, the majority of work has focused on discussion for its contribution to either transmitting knowledge or to training skills for civic participation, such as public speaking (Parker, 2006; see also Rubin, 2007).

Drawing on existing research-based practices of inquiry-oriented classroom discussion (Alexander, 2005; Mercer & Littleton, 2007) and findings on youth civic identity (Rubin, 2007; Youniss, et al., 2002), the investigators developed a discussion model for current events. The model incorporated three processes that have been found in prior research to support belief formation and reasoning: (1) exchanging beliefs, (2) co-constructing beliefs and knowledge with others, and (3) articulating a personal point of view supported by explicit reasoning (Frijters et al., 2008). In this model, the teacher encourages students to go beyond the typical transmission of knowledge in current events discussions to a community of inquiry in which the teacher guides the development of understanding and meaning making, complex and reflective talk is the norm, and encourages students to make their thinking explicit (considered keys for identity development; see Tracy, 2002).

3) Methods, design and procedure

We employed design-based research principles, which involve the field-testing of instructional methods and curricular resources to examine the realities of classroom teaching and learning in context (Cobb, et al., 2003). Our goal was to study learning that was situated within a classroom context by designing and studying the effect of discussion-based interventions. With this purpose, during the 2010-11 school year, the faculty co-PI spent the fall semester observing and meeting with the teacher (Heather Cunningham, the student co-PI) at the school site to understand the school context. During the fall, they also co-designed the model and a plan for the discussions for the spring 2011 semester. The final lesson design and data collection are being done iteratively during the spring semester. IRB approval for the study was received in the fall (see attachment).

Students in two classes of "Politics and Civics" taught by Ms. Cunningham were invited to participate during the first trimester in the fall. Of a total of 55 students in the two classes, of which all were seniors, 53 students (96%) agreed to participate. There were several reasons for the high participation rates. First, the school uses a looping model in which the teacher stays with the same students from 9th to 12th grade, which builds a close personal relationship. Also, many students were 18 years of age and as adults did not need the permission of parents to participate. Lastly, a small incentive (a snack) was provided to students to participate.

Discussion model

The current events discussions occurred weekly during the second trimester (January to the end of March). Students read about a current events article from materials collected by the co-PIs the day prior to the discussion. This included background on the issue and excerpted articles that provided at least two positions on the issue. Based on the key processes of discussion identified in the Theoretical Framework (see above), the discussion model follows these steps:

1. *Identification* of issue as whole class.
2. *Small group discussion* of the meaning and diverse positions on the issue, and the formulation of a shared position or articulating differences among group members (*exchanging* and *co-construction of beliefs*).
3. *Whole class discussion* to argue for individual positions using evidence and reasoning (*developing personal point of view* and *verbal reasoning to supporting it*).
4. Essays to formulate position (*developing personal point of view* and *written reasoning to supporting it*).

To support building reasoning skills, in the small group discussions (step 2), students use a graphic organizer to record basic elements of argumentation: (a) the group's position, (b) reasons that support this position, (c) explanations for the reasons, and (d) evidence to support both the reasons and the explanation (see Felton & Herko, 2004). Finally, at the end of class students individually write short essays taking a personal position on the topic and using each of the four elements of argumentation. Because the school employs a technology-infused learning environment, the graphic organizer and essays are composed on the students' laptops and submitted to the teacher electronically during class.

Data sources

This qualitative study employed multiple data sources and analyses in order to provide a textured understanding of the students' participation in discussions. The goal was to understand both the students' belief formation and the development of reasoning skills, as well as whether these impacted their civic identities. Four main sources of data were collected:

- 1) Weekly audio- and video recording of class discussions: 1 to 2 times per week in each of the 2 classes; whole class discussions are videotaped and small group discussions are individually audiotaped.
- 2) Observations and field notes of class discussions: 1 to 2 times per week.
- 3) Focus group interviews: 5 interviews with 3-4 students each at the end of the trimester; duration of 20-30 minutes for each focus group; questions address students' experience with the discussions and its role in the development of their self-understandings of who they are as citizens. Questions will focus on students' interpretations of classroom activities, with a particular emphasis on their understandings and valuations of the role they took in small-group and whole-class discussions, as well as their assessments of their own and others' reasoning abilities and civic competence.
- 4) Class artifacts: weekly student writing assignments and other class work. Students will be assigned pre- and post- individual essays that ask them to read a short newspaper article on a current event, take a position on the issue, and explain their reasons.

No measures of general reasoning or writing skills were administered due to constraints in the teacher's time and demands of the course curriculum.

Researcher roles

Heather Cunningham, a doctoral student and the teacher of record, and John Myers, a faculty member in DIL, have assumed shared responsibility for the development of the discussions, data collection, and data analysis. Ms. Cunningham is collecting the video and audio recordings as well as the class artifacts. Dr. Myers is observing classes and taking field notes. He will also take the lead in conducting the interviews. Both will be equally involved in data analysis and disseminating findings from the study at national conferences. Ms. Cunningham will take a sabbatical from her school during the 2011-12 school year to pursue doctoral studies fulltime, which will also give her the time to work on this project.

4) Data analysis

The data collected will be analyzed to understand the extent that the discussion model supported students' development of beliefs about current events and their verbal and written reasoning skills. Additionally, the data analysis will assess whether and in what ways the discussions helped to strengthen the students' civic identities. More specifically, data will be analyzed as follows.

- Audio- and video recording of class discussions will be qualitatively using the coded constant comparative technique (Strauss, 1987) for the extent that students construct beliefs and form positions, and for their ability to reason with evidence for their position. Recognizing the power dynamic in class discussions, we will also code the discussions for instances in which students claim, dispute, or assign particular narratives of what it means to be a citizen during the discussions.
- Students' weekly essays and their pre- and post- extended essays will be qualitatively coded for change in their evidence-based reasoning, drawing on a coding scheme that we develop based on the elements of argumentation used in the small group discussions and essays (see p. 3).
- Focus group interviews will be qualitatively coded. We will identify themes by noting when students make statements that refer to their own sense of citizenship, experience with the discussions, and interpretations of classroom activities, in order to form basic codes. Then we will compare these codes with our review of the scholarly literature on these topics and check the data against research questions.
- Class artifacts will be analyzed by two individuals to establish reliability using a coding scheme based on the elements of persuasive, evidence-based arguments (e.g. providing evidence and addressing opposing side views) (see Felton & Herko, 2004).

5) Contribution to education or to knowledge of disciplines that inform School of Education programs

This study will provide insights into the motivations for civic action that are developed in classroom discussions. Specifically, we take a widespread and typically unproblematic discourse feature of social studies classrooms, current events discussions, and design a model that leverages the capacity of the discussions with the potential to develop robust civic identities and the development of civic beliefs and reasoning. Based on previous research, we anticipate the findings to show that the students' development of beliefs and reasoning skills to show improvement and that they will be able to better articulate their civic identities. However, we also expect that this will be an uneven process due to the different ways that students engage in discussions and to the differing ways that student voices are included.

We believe that the results will have the potential for widespread impact due to the ubiquity of current events discussion in social studies courses and the general lack of attention in civics education research. For this purpose, one important product of the research will be the refinement and dissemination of our approach to current events discussions as well as teaching tools for classroom teachers. Ultimately, this study will provide professional guidance and materials for implementing a model of discussion for current events that influences the civic competencies of high school students.

We expect to disseminate the findings of this study at national and regional social studies education conferences. This would be a particularly important professional opportunity for Ms. Cunningham as she has not yet participated in such conferences in her chosen field. Both of the investigators also expect to build on this research in the future in terms of larger scale studies that deal with civic development, classroom discussion, and urban classrooms. These themes are also expected to inform Ms. Cunningham's doctoral dissertation.

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Budget

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1. Research assistant

Transcriptions \$828

(20 hours of classroom discussions and
3 hours of focus group interviews;
23 hours of recordings=69 hours of
transcription time)

(\$12.00/hour of transcription time)

Reliability coder for essays \$300

(25 hours @ \$12.00/hour)

2. External hard drive for data backup \$150

TOTAL REQUESTED: \$1,278

Justification

Research assistant: transcriptions are needed so that investigators can adequately analyze the data and to ensure that coding scheme is consistent across the essay data.

External hard drive: To safeguard video and audio data. This equipment should provide continued use to the SOE as it can be used in more than one research project in the future.