

Making Connections: Using Online Discussion Forums to Engage Students in Historical Inquiry

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Previous issues of *Social Education* have highlighted the benefits of using electronic discussion forums, including increasing citizenship skills, supporting historical inquiry, and enhancing classroom discussion.¹ Researchers have also found increased levels of student engagement, enhanced communication skills, and increased participation in discussion.² The 2007 Pew Internet and American Life Project report states that 93 percent of American youth ages 12 to 17 are online and 51 percent of these youths report being online daily.³ Students in classrooms today are technologically literate in ways that their parents and grandparents could not even dream about. They readily turn to the Internet for entertainment, news, and social interaction. Students who are already engaged in online activities may become more intrinsically motivated when their preferred medium of communication and research is utilized within the classroom.⁴

Online Discussion Forums

The ongoing interpretive case study that I will highlight here focused on students' use of online discussion forums within a problem-based inquiry classroom. The focus of inquiry during the year centered on two historical questions: What does it mean to be an American? and, What is America's place in the world?

The participants in this study are students in two sections of my International Baccalaureate History of the Americas course. Students are required to post to the discussion forums four times each six weeks. They have the option of either beginning new discussion threads or responding to the posts of their peers, but all posts must be related back to the content of the course: the social,

political, and economic history of the American continent. I conduct a content analysis of the archived posts at the end of each semester. Utilizing a constant comparative method, 10 themes were identified within the archived discussions by grouping discussion topics into two categories: (1) transfer of knowledge and (2) engagement with class content. Additionally all posts within a discussion thread were read and analyzed chronologically within the topic.⁵ The results of the content analysis, along with student surveys (see sidebars), and in class observations are the basis for the findings in this article. Data was also subject to member checks and peer examination.

Students' Online Discussions and Transfer of Knowledge

On the first day of class, I divided students into groups and gave them the 38 topics that had comprised the main discussion threads from the previous year. Their assignment was to classify each of the topics into larger themes and then turn the themes into a series of historical questions. The synthesis activity at the beginning of the school year gave students the opportunity to review all of the discussion threads, not just the ones they participated in the previous year. As a result students began to make more nuanced observations regarding the connections between the topics. After reviewing my field notes, I noted that one group struggled with creating the historical questions from their categories, particularly with topics that related to the American Dream and foreign policy. When asked to defend why he would put the Iraq War under the American Dream, Edward⁶ replied, "The American Dream fuels foreign ... overseas, policy." After being encouraged to clarify his thinking, he declared, "Like in the Spanish American War, when we wanted to help [Cubans] get their independence. We wanted them to be like us." This thought led to additional questions about the rela-

Selected Discussion Topics by Theme

Domestic Policy Issues/Concerns (Numbers in parenthesis indicate total number of posts)

- What is the American Dream? (12)
- Is Nationalism a good thing? (16)
- What role does Religion play in the U.S.? (26)
- Do we really have it better? (18)
- What does it mean to be an American? (71)
- Immigration in 1900: What was the scale of the effect on U.S. society/economy/politics? How did it shape today's U.S.? (9)
- Will people vote for Hillary [Clinton] or [Barack] Obama based on race or gender? Have either used gender or race to further their campaign? Why or why not? (56)
- True Americans: Who do you think are the REAL Americans now-a-days? (23)

Foreign Policy Issues/Concerns

- Corporate America and the downfall of the world powers (20)
- What is America's place in the world? (31)
- Should the U.S. try to change the world or just stay out of it? Should we provide foreign aid to countries rather than spend it in the U.S.? (8)

tionship between the American Dream and U.S. actions overseas. After a minute of debate, Rachel interjected, "Maybe we need to be asking 'should' rather than 'why'?" Jennie immediately picked up on Rachel's thoughts and asked, "Is it right to go and fix stuff?"⁷ By connecting the American Dream to American expansion students were beginning to reflect upon the interconnectedness of U.S. domestic and foreign policy issues.

Edward's insight into the ideals behind the United States' foray into nation building in Iraq are representative of the new connections he was making between current U.S. policy (e.g., nation building in Iraq) and the ideals expressed in the American Dream. The transcripts of the discussion threads on Iraq and the American Dream reveal that the conversations were very narrow in scope; the American Dream thread was centered on defining the qualities of the American Dream (e.g., "America is about living in a place with more freedoms than almost any other in the world") and its relevance to immigration, while the discussion on Iraq was centered on support for the war (e.g., "Americans are beginning to forget why our troops are in the Middle East. They are beginning to overreact to troop fatalities"). Edward's more refined understanding connected the United States' belief in the American Dream with our desire to spread these ideals to other countries through economic and military imperialism. Rachel's "ah-ha" came with her suggestion that the group should be discussing whether or not the United States should be trying to spread the American Dream at all. Jennie's question reiterates this idea and openly questions the morality of trying to "fix" other countries. At this point the discussion moved from a very specific historical issue to a more universal and persistent historical question. This new understanding gave students the opportunity to explore these two issues from a new perspective.

My field notes also indicated that another group went through a similar process during their own discussion

on what makes a person an American. Millie suggested that they put age, race, religion, and gender under the "Who is an American" question. Hermione then asked Anthony, "Why don't you like the question?" He replied, "It's stereotyping, that's what it's all about." The group eventually settled on the question: "Is a true American defined by their race, gender, religion or age?" What began as a discussion of a legalistic view of citizenship evolved into a discussion of the stereotyping and discrimination that exists throughout American culture, leading to a more precise question that acknowledges the many different perceptions of what makes a person a "true American."⁸ These types of conversations and the resulting connections represent growth in students' historical thinking and inquiry skills.

One of my major concerns going into the project was the issue of appropriate communication skills within the discussion threads. Unlike traditional classroom discussion, the online forums did not occur in real time, and although I would be monitoring students' posts, I was uneasy about the potential for arguments to impede the process of building historical thinking skills. Instead, I was pleasantly surprised to find that students followed the rules of classroom discussion when they acknowledged each other's ideas, critiqued ideas rather than people, and were generally civil to each other. In the transcript of one online discussion, Peter states, "This is true, but wouldn't you agree that such accusations had to come from some reliable source?..."⁹ In a similar exchange, Bob noted that he believed nationalism was a good thing. In his response, Dieter reasoned that "As long as nationalism does not cause one country to think that it is 'better' than another country nationalism is helpful..." In both cases, students acknowledged the viewpoints of their peers prior to interjecting their own thoughts into the discussion.

Upon reflection, I realized that students automatically transferred their knowledge of these discourse rules to

the online forums. Students have had multiple opportunities within their social studies classes to practice these rules. Social studies classes at Hill Country High School utilize traditional class discussion, as well as Socratic circle and debate; after three years of participating in these types of activities, students automatically transferred the familiar rules to their online discussions. They conducted their online discussions in an appropriate manner with very little intervention from me; during the remainder of the year, I had to intervene only twice to remind students to be respectful to their peers (a period of approximately seven months and encompassing 490 individual posts).

Student Engagement with Content

Initially, I found that students were highly interested in current events; however, they often failed to make connections between the past and the present in their posts. In one student-initiated thread addressing the role of religion on American society, the earliest posts made general references such as “Our Declaration of Independence was based on British rights, not the Bible,” and “America’s commitment to Christianity is a result of the Great Awakening.” As the discussion continued students’ connections to class content became more complex. John commented:

Christianity is the largest single religious influence on the United States, as the largest percentage of the U.S. population since European colonization has been Christian. Christians founded our country, and even today, a large group of our leaders at least claim Christian faith. It does have its downfalls, there is religious prejudice, mainly when people belonging to one religion feel threatened in some way by those of other religions. Witness the anti-Catholic sentiment by mainly Anglo-Saxon

Protestants after the large waves of Irish Catholic immigrants.

Similarly, Marilyn argued:

I think that it also goes farther than our laws, but would extend to our culture itself. I think our very identities would be different. Think about the South. Would the prejudices be the same? I think slavery would have been different and I think that even the Civil War would have been different.

In the early weeks of the online discussions, student discourse centered on the current events of interest to them, such as the war in Iraq or immigration reform. Although many of the questions raised were perennial issues that citizens have been struggling with across time, students discussed them as current events and only occasionally included a reference to class content. As the year progressed, the references to course content moved from simply mentioning content that had been addressed in class (e.g., the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence) to the more extended comments quoted above. The connections students made to course content suggest an increasing understanding of the relationship between the present and the past.

The bridges students built between their own concerns and questions about current and historical events were much more powerful than examples I could provide because they were more relevant to the students’ own concerns; for the same reason, their understanding of the complexities of historical interpretation were far deeper. This finding is consistent with the development of historical thinking skills through the use of technology suggested by Stephens and others.¹⁰

Although these types of conversations can occur without the aid of an online discussion forum, use of the forums certainly facilitated the process by providing a much wider variety of

Survey Questions

Students were asked to rate the items below on the following scale: Disagree, Somewhat disagree, neutral, Somewhat agree, Agree, N/A

Posting to the forums:

- Helped me to better understand class content
- Helped me to better understand current events
- Helped me refine my own thinking about current issues
- Helped me refine my own thinking about historical events
- Allowed me to ask questions I might not otherwise have thought about.

My participation in the forums:

- Only occurred because it was required
- Allowed me to express opinions I would not have expressed in class
- Gave me a chance to try out my ideas on other people
- Allowed me to discuss ideas with students in both history classes

The links provided by the forum administrator:

- Gave me fresh insight into issues
- Pointed me to information I did not know
- Were not helpful
- Were related to the themes under discussion

The forum administrator:

- Promptly answered my questions
- Dealt with forum issues quickly
- Maintained a respectful environment on the forums page

Open-Ended Questions

- What were the best things about participating in the forums?
- What needs to be changed about the forums?
- What other comments or suggestions do you have for making the forums better?

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topic threads for students to work with, far more than would have been possible utilizing only in-class discussion. Over the course of the seven and half months that students participated in the forums, 38 different threads were started with 490 individual posts.

Conclusions

The insights into students' thought processes, facilitated by the use of online discussion forums, open up many opportunities for teachers to assist in the development of students' historical inquiry skills. At the same time, teachers maximize instructional time and also effectively integrate technology into the curriculum. Additionally, classroom discussions are, by their very nature, limited by time constraints and differences in the way students interact. Researchers have found that online discussion forums give students a chance to collect their thoughts before posting to the forums and to draw on their own prior knowledge and interests as they form their replies.¹¹ Although the participants in this study were enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program, the use of online discussion forums can be used with students at all levels by providing a more structured forum setting. This can be accomplished by requiring a minimum number of posts, limiting student-initiated threads to specific topics, or by asking students to respond to teacher-initiated threads. Teachers may also choose to use the forums for a single grading period or unit, and then use the archived discussion for review purposes.

In a world where information is the currency of the day, technology can help educators advance student understanding, reasoning, and decision making. One way to do this is to engage students in online discussion forums that both enable them to communicate in a comfortable way and

allow the teacher to interact with students and the curriculum in a more complex and effective manner. ■

Notes

1. Catherine Snyder, "Sharpening Citizenship Skills through Electronic Discussion," *Social Education* 73, no.3 (April 2008); John W. Saye and Thomas Brush, "The Persistent Issues in History Network: Using Technology to Support Historical Inquiry and Civic Reasoning," *Social Education* 69, no.4 (April 2005); Bruce E. Larson, "Considering the Move to Electronic Discussions," *Social Education* 69, no.4 (April 2005).
2. Bruce Larson and T.A. Keiper, "Classroom Discussion and Threaded Electronic Discussion: Learning in Two Arenas," *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* 2, no.1 (June 2007); Saye and Brush, "Student Engagement with Social Issues in a Multimedia-supported Learning Environment," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 27, no. 4 (Fall, 1999): 472-504.
3. Alexandra Rankin MacGill, "Parent and Teenager Internet Use" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2007).
4. Don Weasenworth and Christine Meloni, "Realizing Constructivist Objectives through Collaborative Technologies," *Language Learning and Technology* 6, no.3 (September 2002): 58-86.
5. Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1994).
6. All names are pseudonyms
7. Quotes from field notes taken the week of August 25-29, 2008.
8. Ibid.
9. All remaining quotes are from the online discussion forums posted during the fall semester of 2007 and appear as written by students.
10. Robert P. Stephens et al., "Using Technology to Teach Historical Understanding," *Social Education* 69, no. 4 (April 2005): 151-154.
11. Bruce A. VanSledright, "What Does It Mean to Think Historically...and How Do You Teach It?" *Social Education* 68, no. 3 (April 2004): 230-233; Saye and Brush, "Student Engagement with Social Issues in a Multimedia-supported Learning Environment," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 27, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 472-504; Stephens et al., "Using Technology to Teach Historical Understanding," 151-154.

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