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A Teaching Strategy to Strengthen Habits of Deliberation: The "Evidence on the U" Graphic

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Jeff had been angry. Recounting what had happened to him for the fifth graders in his St. Paul, Minnesota classroom, Jeff exclaimed, "I'd been cheated! How could Mr. Harvey and Ms. Binky have taught me such different stories about Christopher Columbus?"[1] Mr. Harvey, Jeff's fifth grade teacher, had presented Columbus as a hero with the saying, "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." A decade later, Professor Binky, one of Jeff's college instructors, had presented Columbus as a villain with the saying, "In 1493, he stole all that he could see." Jeff had liked both teachers, but each had focused on Columbus's life from only one perspective. In offering a one-dimensional history, they did little to help their students learn "to read, reconstruct, and interpret the past," as called for in the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies.[2] When Jeff began his own career as a social studies educator, that realization had made him feel angry.

Jeff (a co-author of this article) was a preservice teacher when he first developed the strategy we present here. His mentor teacher had asked him to create and teach lessons about Columbus, and the challenge reminded Jeff of Mr. Harvey and Ms. Binky. In Jeff's mind, it did not matter whether he was ten or twenty years old. In suggesting absolute images of Columbus as good or bad, both of his own teachers had missed an opportunity to help their students think with more complexity. As a preservice teacher, Jeff had wanted to do something different with his ten-year-old students. He wanted to invite them to explore Columbus from different perspectives.

Are fifth graders even capable of that sort of deliberative thinking? As a demonstration that these ten-year-old students were indeed capable, Jeff had drawn a pair of glasses, labeling one lens "1492" (representing the view of Indigenous peoples) and the other "1493" (representing the view of the Europeans). You could put on the glasses and look through one lens, or the other. Depending on which eye was open, Jeff told his young students, people would see a different version of Columbus. Students were able to "use" the "glasses" to describe different historical perspectives. Jeff had begun experimenting with how to teach about Columbus in a new way. His initial lesson met with success, and over the next 18 years as an elementary teacher, he honed a teaching strategy that we call "evidence on the U" to support deep and complex thinking in students.

In this article, we explain how to use the evidence on the U strategy with elementary students, and we give examples of scaffolding activities that gradually place much of the responsibility for learning on the students themselves over the course of a year. Before we do that, however, we describe how this teaching strategy supports the goals of social studies education in the elementary grades and beyond.

Learning Habits of Deliberation

Elementary teachers have an important role to play in the pursuit of our end goal, which is to prepare students for the civic duty of deliberation. Social studies educators Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy studied 35 high school social studies teachers who use deliberation to teach about controversial political issues. They describe deliberation as engaging in discussion with the intention to compromise, to listen, and to come to a fair (not purely self-interested) resolution. "[T]eaching students to deliberate is transformative insofar as these are values that would make a stronger democracy, but that are not widely practiced in contemporary American society."[3]

Following standards theme ⑩ **CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**, deliberation is an ideal we want to cultivate in elementary students.[4] It is a democratic principle, which the C3 Framework identifies

"Landing of Columbus" by John Vanderlyn (1846), which resides in the U.S. Capitol. Read about it at www.aoc.gov/art/historic-rotunda-paintings/landing-columbus

in Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools for Civics. Learning goals for elementary students include recognizing perspectives other than one's own and using deliberative processes for making group decisions.[5] Elementary teachers need strategies to help students achieve these goals and promote habits that are important in deliberation. This is foundational work for preparing elementary students to participate in civic life.

Lesson plans that teach two different perspectives of historical characters or events are readily available on popular social media networks such as Pinterest.[6] But briefly considering two perspectives of an event or controversy is not enough. In order for students in the middle and high school grades to naturally choose deliberation as a tool in their civic tool belt, students in the elementary grades need to be actively engaged in more complex models of deliberation. An NCSS Position Statement calls for students "to speculate, think critically, and make personal and civic decisions on information from multiple perspectives."[7] We propose a strategy that can lay a foundation in the elementary grades for this kind of engagement.

A Strategy using a Graphic Organizer

A central component of the strategy is a simple graphic organizer in the shape of the capital letter U. Students learn to place evidence regarding an historical event, social issue or concept on the U to represent differing perspectives about guiding questions such as "Who was Christopher Columbus?"

The shape of conceptual graphic organizers matters. The U shape underscores the fact that perspectives can change depending on the evidence one considers (such as a painting of Columbus landing in "the New World"). The two ends of the U represent extreme responses to any question (e.g., "hero"; "villain"). In contrast to a standard straight continuum, the U shape highlights the fact that extreme positions for any topic share an important feature—an unwillingness to accept arguments from the opposing side.

An additional benefit of the U shape is that it reinforces the idea that there is a flexible space to interpret and justify how evidence responds to a guiding question. A straight-line continuum can unintentionally mark the middle point as merely a compromise position between two opposing sides. The bottom portion of the U however, creates a third space in which students can recognize new positions instead of being tied to the limiting narratives of, for example, Columbus as hero or villain. The focus remains on the evidence.

To use the U strategically, Jeff scaffolds experiences over the course of a school year to support the development of deliberative habits. Two foundational activities help students understand the U shape as a way to display differing perspectives and help students visualize the complexities involved in deliberation. First, students learn to recognize multiple perspectives among pieces of historical evidence on a given topic. Second, students construct oral arguments about an issue that is relevant to their lives, and they practice changing their arguments according to where the argument is placed along the

U. Once this foundation is established, the strategy provides continual practice for students to use the U in new learning situations. In the examples we share below, students use the U to construct written arguments for persuasive essays, analyze current events, present inquiry findings, and clarify conceptual understandings.

Initial Scaffolding: A Personal Narrative

To begin, we suggest using a story to highlight differing perspectives on a topic. For example, Jeff tells students about his experience of learning about Christopher Columbus from his teachers over the years. Jeff uses the basic elements of a story so students feel immersed in the experience. He develops the characters of Mr. Harvey and Ms. Binkey, describes the settings of their two classes, narrates a plot that illustrates his confusion as a student, and then offers a climax by posing a problem to the students and asking them to participate in solving it. Jeff says, "As a student teacher, my first task was to teach about the European Age of Exploration. But I did not want to teach like Mr. Harvey and Ms. Binky had. After I decided what I wanted to do, my mentor teacher told me that the students were too young for the lesson. I disagreed." Jeff then asks his fifth graders, "If you were me, how would you teach about Christopher Columbus?"

Recognizing Multiple Perspectives

Once Jeff has piqued student interest, he draws a large U on the front board. He labels the two extremes: one end of the U represents Columbus as a hero, and the other represents Columbus as a villain. Jeff adds facts about Columbus and his interactions with Indigenous peoples to the U and, because note-taking is an important skill in Jeff's class, students copy down the information in their notes. So far, the information about Columbus has been provided by their teacher. What follows next fulfills the fifth grade Minnesota history content standard: "historical inquiry is a process in which multiple sources and different kinds of historical evidence are analyzed to draw conclusions about how and why things happened in the past."[8]

Jeff presents a variety of historical sources, and students begin to see that each source relates uniquely to the guiding question of "Who was Christopher Columbus?" For example, one is a painting by John Vanderlyn, "Landing of Columbus," commissioned by the U.S. Congress in 1846. With the whole class, Jeff directs students to describe as many details as they can see in the painting. Then the class determines a location on the U graph that best represents whether the painting portrays Columbus as a hero or a villain. First in small groups, and then on their own, students examine more sources such as additional artwork, and primary and secondary historical accounts. In keeping with advice from historian James Loewen, they compare passages about Columbus from textbooks published in 1998, 2002, 2008, and 2012.[9] It is important to provide a wide range of materials so that the exercise supports meaningful conversations between students, rather than serving to bias student opinions or shape their values.

The act of placing sources along the U causes students to engage in conversations. Because historical sources are often complex, they provide much opportunity for dialogue. Students have to make difficult decisions about where the evidence fits on the U. We have found the highest quality of conversation happens in that in-between spot, when resources do not reflect an extreme position. Students begin to focus on their justifications, causing them to examine closely and think analytically, requisite skills for engaging in complex deliberations.

In a formal assessment, students view other historical sources in a looping slide-show (Columbus as depicted on U.S. Postage stamps, paintings, and statues).[10] For each source, students choose the location on the U they believe best represents the perspective portrayed by the source, and they justify their reasoning. Grading criteria include the number of details students list from the source as evidence and the corresponding logic behind their decision of where to place each source on the U. Another part of the assessment includes traditional short-answer questions about Columbus' voyages.

Students Construct Their Own Arguments

After students recognize that there can be multiple answers to a guiding question in social studies, it is time to push their thinking further. It helps to simplify the task. Instead of working to identify others' perspectives while learning new historical content, the purpose of the activity shifts to having students construct their own arguments. Jeff has found that using a topic that is relevant to students' lives and does not require content-related background knowledge removes barriers to student engagement. Students participate in a debate and use the U to organize their thoughts and construct their own arguments. For the debate, a guiding question could be something like "Should we require students to wear school uniforms?"

Jeff uses a modified version of the philosophical chairs method[11] in which student desks are arranged in a U-shape in the classroom. The students at the ends of the U represent the two extreme positions in the debate. In the first round, each student creates an answer to the guiding question according to where he or she is seated on the U. In the second round, students move to a new location and argue from that vantage point, which gives students an opportunity to present different perspectives.

The U Strategy in Different Social Studies Contexts

Once the concept of the U is established, this method can be used in a variety of ways to support and extend student learning throughout the year. The universality of the evidence on the U graphic organizer allows students to identify and construct differing viewpoints in a variety of contexts.

Writing persuasive essays. The U graphic can help students establish points and counterpoints as they begin

to write persuasive essays. For example, if you were an American colonist, should you remain loyal to the English crown or side with the rebellious patriots? Students use these two extremes and the space in between to construct a variety of arguments that are represented by different positions on the U. As students view historical evidence from the time period, the U enables them to visualize how the evidence supports a specific perspective on the topic. These different perspectives can generate topic sentences for body paragraphs in traditional essay formats.

Exploring current events. When students are curious about controversial current events, it can put teachers on the spot. The U can help students and teachers explore current events together without the teacher having to rely on personal opinion or experience. Students can also participate by researching arguments to support various positions on the U graphic.

Presenting inquiry findings. Students can tackle more complex topics after they have become comfortable using the U strategy. One way is for students to use inquiry to dig deep into an assigned position about a social studies topic. Students assume different roles and present them in a debate similar to the philosophical chairs activity described previously. One benefit is that students get to present findings from their inquiry with the safety of not having to worry if people think their assigned position is their personal opinion. A fun spin on the game is to assign roles secretly and have other students guess what perspective their peers represent based on their written or spoken words. It is a great way to promote inquiry, have fun, and teach students the power of persuasive speech.

The U Strategy in Concept Development

Social studies themes and standards often include abstract concepts. The evidence on the U strategy can help students learn to identify extremes as a way to begin the process of concept formation. The U shape also offers versatility in that it can help students ponder a variety of concepts from a variety of disciplines. Here are examples of conceptual opposites that Jeff has explored with his students over the years. For each pair of terms, we list the curricular context and suggest a guiding question or questions.

Aggressive to Passive. Context: Relationships and conflict resolution. Guiding Questions: What strategies do you use to handle conflict? How do you learn to be assertive? What are the costs and benefits to being aggressive, assertive, or passive when handling a conflict?

Individual to Community. Context: Decisions about rights and how we organize societies. Jeff uses this pair of concepts when he reads the novel, *The Giver*, out loud to students.[12] Guiding Question: How do you balance your rights as an individual with your responsibility to others?

Private to Public. Context: Preamble to the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights; being a global technology citizen; user safety when one is online. Guiding Question: What are some examples of personal freedoms (e.g., saying what you want) that are delimited by public needs (e.g., safety, privacy, and personal respect)?

Us to Other. Context: Categories based on socially perceived differences (e.g., economic class; skin color; language spoken)

that vary throughout historical episodes (e.g., colonization, slavery, migration, or war). Guiding Questions: How do we view people who are different from ourselves? In what ways are they different? How do we behave toward someone who we classify as "different"?

Colonizer to Colonized. Context: economic incentives for colonization, influence of colonization on humans and natural resources, models for population interactions. Guiding question: How does the process of colonization influence specific populations?

Planning Lessons and Units

The U strategy can also benefit teachers as they collect resources to share with students. With the increasing number of high-quality resources available online, the task for teachers has changed over the years. The chore used to be finding sources, but now the burden has changed to filtering through the myriad of options. Teachers can use the U to help organize the sources they gather and design more balanced—and more interesting—lessons.

Conclusion

The evidence on the U strategy and graphic organizer we present in this article is a conceptual tool for helping elementary students learn to engage in complex deliberation about topics and issues from the past and in the present. Too often, a teacher's focus on covering curriculum, methodical delivery of academic content, and instructional strategies overshadows the need to develop skill-based processes so that students can learn to engage in deliberation.

In using the evidence on the U strategy, elementary teachers can prepare their students for the competencies that will be expected of them in later grades. For example, the C3 Framework describes how older students should be able to evaluate sources as part of inquiry-based learning.[13] Likewise, "powerful social studies" means that students are learning "to assess the merits of competing arguments."[14] The strategy we present in this article describes scaffolding to support elementary students before they can critically evaluate sources and arguments fully on their own. The evidence on the U strategy teaches students to recognize multiple perspectives and construct their own arguments, preparing them to be successful social studies students in the middle and high school grades.

Some educators might ask if it is developmentally appropriate to teach complex history with elementary students. Indeed, the cognitive development of students in the primary grades is at a more basic level than it is in the later grades. However, the strategy we present in this article can be a useful tool for helping learners in the elementary grades consider different points of view. Whether on the playground or in the classroom, young learners are exposed to the different perspectives of their classmates on a daily basis. The evidence on the U strategy helps elementary students consider perspectives that may differ from their own, so they will be ready as middle and high school students to practice ideals of civic and history education such as deliberating controversial political issues[15] and making historical claims backed by historical sources.[16]

Typically, and for too many years, elementary social studies lessons have consisted of a single story. Fortunately, counter-narratives and multiple perspectives have become more available among educational resources. Instead of teaching one or even two sides of an event, concept, or issue, the evidence on the U strategy can help students and teachers visualize and explore multiple ways of understanding a given topic. Our hope is that this strategy provides an inclusive next step for supporting elementary students and that these elevated expectations better reflect the deep complexity of our world.

Notes

1. The names in this article are pseudonyms (except "Jeff").
2. Theme ❷ **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**, from NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
3. D. Hess and P. McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (New York: Routledge: 2015): 7.
4. NCSS (2010), Chapter 2—The themes of social studies, www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands.
5. Dimension 2: "Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools," in NCSS, *The College,Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013): 33.*
6. For an example of a Pinterest lesson, search on pinterest.com, "Benedict Arnold: Hero or Villain?" ("Hero or Villain series," Teacher's Discovery, 2016).
7. NCSS, "NCSS Position Statement, A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies," *Social Education*, 80, no. 3 (2016), 180.
8. Minnesota Department of Education, "Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Social Studies, 5.4.1.2.1, 49, (2011), education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/stds/soc.
9. James Loewen, *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited about Doing History,* 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2018).
10. Examples of online images include Columbus depicted in sculpture (www.aoc.gov/art/doors/columbus-doors); in painting (www.aoc.gov/art/historic-rotunda-paintings/landing-columbus); on postage stamps (arago.si.edu/category_2027851.html); in a statue vandalized with red paint in 2019 (www.cnn.com/2019/10/14/us/columbus-statues-vandalized-trnd/index.html); and in recent protest art (www.telesurenglish.net/multimedia/Anti-Columbus-Protests-Sweep-the-Americas-20171009-0030.html) and photos (https://www.democracyandme.org/indigenous-peoples-day-vs-columbus-day-what-is-all-of-the-fuse-about/).
11. For an example of the method that Jeff uses, see "Philosophical Chairs" by Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), 14-minute video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=nY2LVPlFU5U&feature=youtu.be.
12. L. Lowry, *The Giver* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1993).
13. "Dimension 3: Evaluating sources and using evidence," in the *C3 Framework*, 53–57.
14. "NCSS Position Statement" (2016): 181.
15. Hess and McAvoy.
16. Stanford History Education Group. (n.d.), "Reading Like a Historian: History Lessons," sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons.

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