Sharpening Citizenship Skills through Electronic Discussion

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At the heart of social studies education is the notion that social studies teachers teach core civic values that educate citizens and perpetuate democracy. As our democratic system continues to evolve, technology is playing a greater role in how we learn and communicate. It makes sense, then, that social studies educators use technology to teach new forms of communication.

Electronic discourse is one form of electronic media that is commonly used in the post secondary environment and is highly adaptable to the classroom. The term "electronic discourse" broadly represents all forms of electronic communication. The medium offers unique opportunities for the social studies teacher to enhance instruction and increase student participation. Electronic discourse gives students the opportunity to react in writing to issues related to their learning. Electronic discussion boards (a form of teacher-mediated asynchronous chat room) as an instructional tool have blossomed in the last few years. Most Internet-based software systems (Blackboard, WebCT, Angel, Moodle, etc.) have an electronic discussion board component. As more and more schools offer, or in some cases insist upon, Internet-based class interfaces, it is worth the time to evaluate how successful electronic discourse enhances classroom instruction. What exactly is electronic discourse? How do we know the task is improving student learning? To help answer these questions, I will describe an electronic discussion board-related assignment completed by my 10th-grade

world history students and also detail my conclusions, overall, about working with this medium.

The Electronic Discussion Board

In the fall of 2005, I launched the use of Blackboard with my three 10th grade world history honors classes.[1] Prior to that year, I had spent some time experimenting with homemade websites and the various features of Blackboard. I attempted to create my own website, but couldn't make it user friendly enough to be truly helpful to my students. I piloted discussions on Blackboard twice in the 2004-2005 school year and also tried posting assignments and using the site as a portal for links to primary source documents. In September of 2005, I immersed my classes into the Blackboard system. This meant my students were required to participate in seven different topics in history throughout the year. In addition, student handouts were available online, students had password-protected access to their grades and assignments, and class information was posted daily.

The following task was the first online discussion the students conducted. Twelve students were assigned to this dis-

cussion group; seven of the students were boys, five were girls. All were between the ages of 14 and 16, with most being 15 at the time of this task. The discussion took place over 11 days and occurred entirely outside of class. During the first week, however, I referred to the discussion a couple of times in class by pointing out exemplary student posts. Each student was required to make a total of four postings during the 11 days allotted. The first postings delineated each student's initial reaction to the question. The successive three postings reflected the synthesis of discussions with their peers. I monitored the discussion daily and participated once to post a political cartoon related to the question. The 12 students posted 42 times over the course of the 11 days. The average posting length was seven lines of text. The shortest posts (five in total) were four lines of text. One post developed into more than 20 lines of text.

Students were asked to read posting guidelines before they began. Generally, they were asked to adhere to all the rules of conduct and language expected in the classroom. I reserved the right to delete inappropriate postings. Inappropriate comments resulted in a loss of credit for the assignment.

The initial question was as follows:

Based on your reading of Chapter 22 and your class notes, do you

believe that the causes of the French Revolution were primarily economic or primarily political? Explain your response using examples to support your argument. You must respond first by giving your point of view. Then, revisit the discussion three more times on three different days to contribute to your group's conversation. Be sure to follow all the rules put forth in the General Rules section of Blackboard.

A few days into the discussion, I posted a link to a provocative political cartoon.

The cartoon served as a catalyst for student discussion. In our class work, I had discussed with the students various laws passed during the revolution that limited the freedoms of the First Estate. One of the laws we discussed forbade nobility from riding in carriages in Paris. This cartoon was published just after that law was passed. While we discussed the historical situation in class, I did not show my students this cartoon in class. Their first viewing of the cartoon was on the Blackboard discussion thread, without my assistance. The cartoon is visually appealing and rich with details. It had the impact that I had hoped. The students understood the cartoonist's intention and were able to analyze specific artistic details as they pertained to the historical events of the French Revolution. The cartoon, part of the Musée de la Révolution Française collection in Vizille, France, may also be viewed at the George Mason University sponsored site entitled Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.[2]

The sample thread that follows represents a typical student exchange on the discussion board. Students were able to interpret different elements of the cartoon without my guidance. There were clearly some who were more able (like Judson and Shuli, see below) than others (Philip, see below).[3] It is evident that the discussion advanced everyone's understanding of the topic, as students consistently applied correct terms and synthesized material to form conclusions. The posts, excerpted from the string of 42 posts, are placed in chronological order and are reproduced exactly as the students wrote them, without editing the grammar or spelling.

Author: Judson Post # 6
Subject: Re: Here is something else to consider...

The cartoon posted definitely supports the idea that the French Revolution was sparked by political favor. To show this, he shows a dog running in the mud and splattered the nobility. In a way, it says that the nobility have stooped low enough to let the dogs walk over them and push them around while the peasants stand on the side and laugh at them. The noblemen don't bother doing anything about the dog (which could represent the problems of France), and they seem rather helpless. The fact that the carriage driver is holding a whip, while he watches the nobleman struggle, may represent how the peasants when united have more power than the nobility. I think that the cartoonist drew this from a peasants point of view because when you first look at the cartoon, you see the noblemen and you don't really feel all that sorry for them. You seem to think that they are getting what they deserve for doing nothing about their country's problems.

Author: Frank Post # 7
Subject: Re: Here is something else to consider...
I think the artist believes the revolution was cause by political battles. The Nat'l Assembly had little reason to pass this law that outlawed carriages. Unless they were trying to keep the nobles from traveling, what noble will leave the safety of there home if they don't have a way of protecting themselves. As it's shown in the picture they may or may not be welcome. What's to stop a person from attacking the King or Queen, nothing. The political battle between the Nat'l Assembly, and the King were a big part of the revolution. This cartoonist was a believer in that.

Author: Shuli Post # 10
Subject: Re: Here is something else to consider...
I believe this cartoon is showing how the law passed affected the noblepeople, and therefore supporting that the revolution was started from political aspects. I believe it's showing that without the nobility's money to pay for carriages and

A French cartoon of the revolutionary period, by Bance: The Unpleasantness of Walking.

such, they are just like the peasants and nothing more, and therefore can't even stop a splash of mud from something as low in class as a dog. (I apologize to the dog-lovers, I'm not discriminating, just trying to make a point.) I believe the dog in the cartoon represents everything lower than nobility, and the fact that the head of the dog is standing high represents that the National Assembly and people of the 3rd class do not look up to the nobility as anyone special. In my opinion, this cartoon portrays that the problem in France is the tension and disparity between the rights of the nobility and National Assembly (everyone else).

Author: Philip   Post # 18
Subject: Re: Here is something else to consider...
I can't really tell if the cartoonist is saying that the revolution is political or economical but i think i know what he is saying. My guess is that the dog represents the peasants and they are running in the mud freely because they are use to it. The nobles who now cannot use the carriages are being bombarded with mud. This could show that the peasants are talking advantage of the nobles in the streets and getting them dirty.

Author: Levi   Post # 21
Subject: Re: Here is something else to consider...
I think that in the picture that the river of mud that is constantly flowing represents the problems and troubles that are facing the country. The fact that it is splattering onto the nobles may represent how the problems of the country are becoming the problems of the nobles. Also it in some way could be taken that it is the peasents way of ravenge because of how the peasents have the wip and are leaing up against a cariage.

Author: Razia   Post # 23
Subject: Re: Here is something else to consider...
I agree with everyone that the dog in the political cartoon represents the peasants during the french revolution. When i first saw the cartoon i got the impression that the nobles are being embaresed by the dog. It seems that they are at fault for all the hardships the thrid estate has faced during this time period (which they have) and the peasants are "getting even." I definatly think the author of this cartoon supported the views of the commoners because he does nothing in the drawing to hint at any common ground between himself and the feelings of the french nobility.

Author: Elizabeth   Post # 27
Subject: Re: Here is something else to consider...
Levis thinking was very insightful, and I fully agree. The path of mud is the citizens and then the way it splatters is showing how they are considered a problem by the King and Queen. The citizens revolution were finally getting in the way of the monarch, they were having to yield to them. I think this peice represents the start of the actual progress from the revolution, and the starting of a new day in history.

Author: Clark   Post # 31
Subject: Re: Here is something else to consider...
I full agree with Judson's response. The fact that the nobility stand there helpless shows how the tides have turned, and the mud, also representing the third estate, is getting its revenge, and gaining power on the once-powerful nobility. The carriage driver, who also could represent the third estate, standing on the sidewalk with the whip could be smiling because he knows that the nobles have gotten what they deserved for not attempting to do anything about the political unrest in France.

This discussion thread represents a genuine attempt on the part of eight students to evaluate the cartoonist's point of view, the details of the cartoon, and then, to address the umbrella question: whether or not the French Revolution was spawned by political or economic motives. Their concern over the symbolic meaning of the mud in the cartoon is a particular point of focus. Judson briefly mentioned the dog and the mud in his post (Post #6). Shuli brought the topic up again in Post #10. From that point on, the students seem to focus on the dog and in particular, the symbolism of the mud as it relates to the problems and causes of the revolution. This focused interaction demonstrates that the students were reading and thinking about each other's postings as they thoughtfully analyzed the content of the cartoon. This can be seen clearly when Levi advances the discussion by attaching meaning to the mud: "The fact that [the mud] is splattering onto the nobles may represent how the problems of the country are becoming the problems of the nobles." Levi's astute observation identified the mud as symbolically representing the problems that sparked the revolution. Clark, in the last posting of the thread, agrees with Judson and extends Levi's comment: "... The fact that the nobility stand there helpless shows how the tides have turned, and the mud, also representing the third estate, is getting its revenge, and gaining power on the once-powerful nobility." Clark specifically identifies the mud as representing the third estate. In order to theorize on the meaning of the mud, the students had to apply what they were learning in class abstractly. The proper and frequent use of the unit's vocabulary is evident in these two quotes, representing an application of new learning material. The last three posts specifically respond to previous points made by classmates, representing an analysis and synthesis of the new learning material. The interaction is civil, thoughtful, and recursive.

Students in this discussion demonstrated a new proficiency in that it was their first attempt at a formal electronic dialogue. They made an effort to create meaning with each other as they grappled with the discussion question provided. The task was authentic and engaging, socially based and socially mediated with tools students could employ independent of the teacher.

Advantages of Electronic Discourse in the Social Studies Classroom

- Students' language becomes more syntactically sophisticated. That is, compared to classroom discussion responses, their postings in electronic discussions are well developed and use more complicated sentence structure.

- Students use the lexicon of the lesson more often. The electronic discussion gave students frequent opportunities to practice using words like "political," "nobility," "third estate," "economic" and "revolution." The frequency and correct use of terms reinforces their meanings for the students.

- The learning becomes recursive. Students read and re-read each other's posts prior to writing their own posts. This means that they are exposed to the content and vocabulary of the lesson multiple times over the course of their four postings. The redundancy in the content of the postings indicates that they are learning from each other, reinforcing correct ideas, or group supported notions. With each consecutive posting, students' depth of understanding increases as they weave new information into previously learned material.

- Students enjoy this type of assignment over more traditional forms of homework. Twice during the school year, I used the survey feature in Blackboard to ask my students a series of questions about the use of Blackboard in the class. Most of the questions were in the form of Likert scale questions. Overwhelmingly, students indicated that they thought the Blackboard site was a useful learning tool, and in particular, the discussion boards were a more interesting form of homework when compared to more traditional assignments.

- More students participate in an electronic discussion than in a classroom discussion. The participation is also more thoughtful in nature. In the full discussion of the French Revolution, almost all 12 of the students participated four times. A couple participated one to three times. All logged on and posted at least one entry. This represents 100 percent minimum participation by the class and 83 percent full participation. When I compare that to results in scored classroom discussions and more informally structured classroom discussions, the participation level in this case is much higher. In particular, electronic discussion prompts those students who normally don't participate in a classroom discussion to share their ideas. This medium provides a forum for participation to those students who are reluctant to speak in class, or who need more time to process information prior to making a contribution.

- Many of the students chose to word process their posts prior to submitting to the discussion board. This meant that they wrote, proofread, and reviewed their posts before their peers read it. I believe there are two reasons why students did this. First, proper grammar and spelling were requirements in my rubric for full credit on the assignment. Second, students recognized that their writing had an audience beyond the teacher, prompting them to put extra effort into their work. The result was a second, or third draft of their thinking.

Overcoming Drawbacks of Electronic Discourse

- Access to the Internet is the biggest stumbling block to this type of learning activity. Obviously, one cannot assign this task to students who don't have Internet access. I found several ways to overcome this problem. I gave students two weeks to complete their posts; this provided sufficient time to access the Internet at school if they did not have Internet access at home. Also, I worked with our media specialists to provide unhindered access to the computers in the library and labs for the completion of this assignment. When Internet access was absolutely impossible, I allowed students to hand in their posting on paper.

- Access for the teacher is also a concern. If your school does not subscribe to an online classroom interface like Blackboard, there are free sites available for teachers. One that seems to be gaining popularity is Moodle at **www.moodle.org**. This site allows the user to set up an electronic classroom space complete with discussion board features. It is password protected and its basic features are free.

- Time: your time and your students' time. It takes time to read the discussion board(s) every day. When

I assigned discussion boards to my students, I had to leave out other assignments.

What I Have Learned

- After conducting several electronic discussions throughout the year, I concluded that 10 students was the optimal number per discussion group: fewer participants in a group produced formless discussions; more than 10 participants led to discussions in which a few voices dominated.

- Four postings is a manageable number in a 10-student discussion group. Four contributions allowed students to opine, synthesize, and refute. The teacher has ample textual evidence to evaluate the student's understanding of the topic.

- Two weeks enabled students to overcome any technological obstacles and provided an opportunity for the discussion to blossom. Reminders of the assignment need to be given just like other homework assignments. I was also very careful to make this the homework assignment if we were in the midst of a discussion. Students were quick to point out overload if I tried to layer too many other assignments into a two-week discussion period.

- I monitored the discussion daily. There were no major etiquette infractions, but I did delete some postings during the year. I asked the students involved to rewrite their posts in a more acceptable tone.

- I tried not to interfere during the course of a discussion. At the end of the two weeks, though, I gave specific feedback to each discussion group. I highlighted particularly good insights and exceptional communication techniques. This feedback reinforced and perpetuated good behavior and thoughtful work in future discussions.

- Stick with it. The first couple of attempts at this might be difficult. It is a valuable skill though, and one that students are capable of grasping. Speak to any returning college student and he or she will tell you that communication with their professors is often electronic, their courses have discussion board components, and they need to navigate sophisticated school websites in order to register for classes. And of course, beyond college, the work world demands computer literacy. This is a skill social studies teachers need to teach their students.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of instituting this feature into my 10th grade class was that at the end of the year, I felt like I knew my students' abilities much better than I ever had. Reading their posts provided me with insight into how they were thinking and reasoning. It is yet another tool to assess students' learning. I had always regretted that feeling at the end of the year when I realized that I had never quite reached those reserved students who rarely spoke in class. This new form of instruction gave me a chance to interact with all of my students and learn their abilities in much more helpful detail. On a pedagogical level, the discussion was a mirror through which my teaching was reflected. Did the students understand the lesson that day? Were they properly applying their new information to the discussion question? When misconceptions appeared in the discussion board, I was able to address them to clarify students' understanding of the historical topic.

I believe that electronic discourse is a viable form of social studies instruction if our goal is to sharpen the skills of citizenship. Electronic forms of communication are becoming increasingly necessary in order to be a proactive citizen in our democracy. It is the nature and mandate of social studies to help students develop these skills. 🖳

Useful websites:

Blackboard: **www.Blackboard.org.**
For a tutorial, go to: **www.Blackboard.com/ products/as/learningsys/demo.htm**
Moodle: **www.moodle.org**

Notes

1. While taught at an honors level, my school had a policy of open enrollment for all classes. Thus, there were no prerequisites or prior academic hurdles for acceptance into the class. This provided for a more heterogeneous, though highly motivated, cohort of learners.
2. George Mason University website: chnm.gmu.edu/ revolution/searchfr.php?function=find&keyword=walking&sourceImage=1
3. All student names are pseudonyms.

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