



Let Freedom Ring: Using the “Circle of Knowledge” Strategy to Examine American Symbols

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With the advent of Common Core standards that focus on speaking and listening, discussion should be a tool in every elementary teacher’s tool belt. As they discuss a topic, elementary students learn not just the content, but also the skills and social norms they need to become contributing members of our society. Discussion helps students to develop better conflict resolution skills, strengthen comprehension, and be active in their own learning.¹ In the lower grades, students should begin learning how to base their opinions on evidence—and also how to listen respectfully to the opinions of their peers.

Still, I’ve found that leading class discussions can be difficult for a variety of reasons, including a lack of student interest and students talking out of turn. Teachers may not know how to effectively lead a discussion or teach basic skills of civic discourse to such young participants. Students, especially those at the elementary level, need guidance and scaffolding as they learn how to participate in discussion-based lessons. To remedy some of these issues, step-by-step approaches can be used to improve your chances of success. It’s been my experience that one of the best teaching strategies is the circle of knowledge.

The circle of knowledge, described in *The Strategic Teacher: Selecting the Right Research-Based Strategy for Every Lesson*, is based on discussion strategies such as the jigsaw and literacy circles.² It “provides teachers with a strategic framework for planning and conducting discussions in any classroom,” and it helps us create discussions “marked by high levels of participation, a clear and content-driven focus, and active, in-depth thinking on the part of students.”³

Teachers within our district have praised this strategy, especially by those in the upper elementary grades, for practical, as well as pedagogical reasons. They say it allows them to “cover” several content standards during one lesson while at the same time helping their students better remember the material. In turn, by adding a persuasive writing piece to the lesson, teachers can incorporate Common Core language arts and literacy objectives that prepare students for writing assessments as well.

The circle of knowledge strategy has six steps, which I’ve slightly revised here:⁴

- Establish the topic and purpose of the discussion
- Develop a sparking question
- Develop a focus question
- Decide how students will acquire the information they need to participate in the discussion
- Developing a kindling activity
- Create a synthesis activity for the discussion⁵

Let’s discuss each of these steps in turn.

1) Establish the Topic and Purpose

Within the curriculum established for your state and school, choose topics that “are magnets for controversy, are rich with implications, and will stimulate a high degree of student interest.” Like many other social studies topics, the study of American symbols is often included in elementary level social studies content standards, and is important in the development of our students’ understanding of “the ideals that our country is based on and the goals we hope we can live up to.”⁶ The study of symbols is often an elementary student’s first attempt at conceptualizing higher-order topics. It forces students to consider questions such as “Why is the bald eagle the symbol of America?” and “Why does a bell with a crack in it represent liberty?”

2) Develop a Sparking Question

Sparking questions “are designed to build bridges between the students’ prior knowledge and the content to be

discussed.” They also help “generate interest in the topic being discussed.”⁷ For this lesson, develop a question such as, “Do you know any symbols that represent the United States? What are they?” Or, if your students have already learned about symbols, “Why do you think the Statue of Liberty represents the United States?” To make the question even more relatable to elementary level students, you could ask “Have you seen any of America’s symbols in person?” or “Do we have any American symbols in this classroom?” After allowing a few students to answer the questions aloud, have the class write down and save their answers. At the end of the lesson, allow your students to reread their answers and reflect on what they learned from their discussions.

3) Develop a Focus Question

Focus questions should meet several requirements, including being open-ended, controversial (to a degree for elementary level students) and having no “right or wrong” answer. Let’s teach students from an early age that social studies is not simply a series of dates and facts to be remembered only for a test, but a fluid and challenging subject based on controversy, debate, and inquiry. However, an opinion should always be backed up by facts. In the case of a discussion about symbols, an interesting focus question could be, “If you were selected to meet with a group of students from different countries and could only bring one symbol to represent the United States, what would it be? Why did you choose this symbol?” As with the sparking questions, make sure that your students write down and save their answers to this question before starting the discussions. At the completion of the assignment, they can refer back to their original answers and determine if they changed their mind based on what they learned about each symbol from their sources and classmates.

4) Decide How Students will Acquire Information

Pre-select scholarly and credible sources that students will use to find information about the topic of study. They’ll use this knowledge to help them develop answers and identify the facts to help them back up their opinions. Give each group a specific American symbol on which to become “expert.” For example, one group of students will learn about the Liberty Bell, while others will learn about the U.S. flag, Uncle Sam, and other symbols (similar to a jigsaw activity).

If you use online resources, avoid “hobby” websites (maintained by individual persons, clubs, or created by school students themselves), as these often contain errors, unwanted advertisements, and poorly cited statements. On the topic of national symbols, take time to review the excellent educational websites provided by the U.S. Mint, National Park Service, Library of Congress, National Archives and Records Administration, National Gallery of Art, and National Portrait Gallery.

For each symbol, provide a variety of sources that students can choose from, including textbooks, tradebooks, websites, and media clips that you may have on hand. Regardless of

the sources you choose, make sure that all students in each expert group are not given the same source. There are two benefits to doing this. First, you can differentiate the sources to each of your students’ ability levels, providing appropriate sources that will match each of your students’ academic strengths. Second, your students will be able to understand the importance of using multiple sources as they discover that various sources that relate the history and meaning of a symbol will often provide different information.

5) Develop a Kindling Activity

This five-part step (labeled A–E) provides students with a chance to take part in a series of discussions about American symbols.

(A) Divide students into small groups to discuss their assigned topics. Each individual student will be a member of two discussion groups. The first groups will be homogenous, consisting of students who all researched the same symbol. In this grouping, students will discuss what they learned about a symbol and why they think that it should be brought to the group of international students as the one that best represents our nation.

(B) Ask every student to take notes about what his or her fellow students say. I’ve found the best approach is to prepare a graphic organizer that helps students to take notes (**HANDOUT 1**). The graphic organizer includes images of the topic along with text boxes. In the homogenous group, students will write a group member’s name over each different image of their symbol and then write down the information that that group member shares in the box next to the image. This writing activity tends to slow down the discussion and help students more seriously “weigh their words.”

(C) Now move students into new, mixed groups—with members who have learned about different symbols. In this second discussion, each student will provide information about the symbol that he or she learned about and state why it “best represents America.”

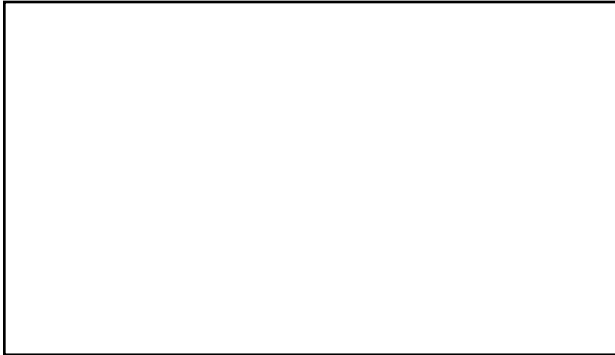
Create a different graphic organizer for students to use in these heterogenous groups. This organizer includes all of the U.S. symbols being studied (**HANDOUT 2**). Students write the name of the group members next to the corresponding symbol they are discussing. This approach also has the potential to help them develop better listening and speaking skills that are required by the Common Core standards, as students must speak clearly so their classmates can write down what they say. Tell the class that each student in a group must be quoted on all the graphic organizers coming from that group. In short, each student must contribute something to the discussion happening in his or her group—and everyone in that group must listen. All voices have a chance to be heard.

(D) As a lesson extension, you can require that each group must come to a consensus about which symbol “best represents the United States of America.” This “exercise in persuasion” would likely provide students with examples of some of the challenges encountered in a democratic form of government. Everyone is coming to the table with different perspectives!

Studying One American Symbol

HANDOUT 1

Sketch your group's symbol here:



Name or title of this symbol:

What has your group learned about this symbol?

Record your fellow students' responses below.

Name each member of your group	How did this person answer the question: "Why is this the very best symbol to represent our nation, the United States of America?"
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

HANDOUT 2

Comparing Different American Symbols

Name of each speaker	Name or title of the symbol that he or she advocates as the very best	How did this person answer the question: "Why is the symbol I studied the very best symbol to represent our nation, the United States of America?"
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		



(E) Finally, bring the class back together for a whole-group discussion. Ask each group to elect a spokesperson to describe the “symbol that best represents the United States” and explain the group’s rationale for its selection. Then open up the discussion, so that other students can also share their personal choice for the “best” symbol, describe facts they learned from various sources, and relate statements made by their classmates during the discussions. For example, a student might say, “I think the Statue of Liberty best represents America because Emily said it has offered hope to immigrants for a new life for a long time. My book also said the same thing.”

6) Create a Synthesis Activity

Students can conclude the discussion about symbols with an interdisciplinary activity by writing a persuasive essay about which symbol they would use to represent the United States. To support their opinions, students should offer specific details from scholarly sources as well as statements made by their group members. This activity will also be good practice for writing conventions such as how to correctly use capitalization, quotation marks, spelling, and punctuation. These paragraphs can serve as a final assessment of what students learned about symbols from this lesson.

Flexibility

I’ve created and written about lessons that incorporate the circle of knowledge strategy for examining social studies topics such as folk tales, causes of the Civil War, immigration, the suffrage movement, and the New Deal. You may notice that, like many

teachers, I’ve modified the circle of knowledge strategy to meet the needs of my particular audience, in this case by developing a graphic organizer and adding an individual writing component to the strategy.

While to some it may be difficult to visualize discussion as a strategy that works well with elementary level students, research has shown it’s important to introduce at an early age the skills of participating in a discussion. In small groups, it’s easier for students to share their opinions and contribute to a discussion. Critical social studies skills such as analyzing multiple sources, reviewing the historical context, and communicating results can be practiced when using this strategy. Finally, the activity can be modified to include persuasive writing and the practice of writing conventions.

Using American symbols as the topic of discussion in a circle of knowledge activity allows elementary level students to gain a personal connection to the ideals each symbol represents. Students will learn what symbols mean and, that while symbols embody American ideals, everyone is allowed to have their own opinion about which one is the most representative of our nation. Though there are no absolutely right or wrong answers, students must use factual data to support their cause. One of the cornerstones of our republic is the right that all citizens have to voice their opinions and constructively debate the issues of the day. As elementary students learn this through the study of America’s symbols, they will allow “freedom to ring” for generations to come. ●

Notes

1. For more on the use of discussion at the elementary level see: Harvey F. Silver, Richard W. Strong, Mathew J. Perini, *The Strategic Teacher: Selecting the Right Research-Based Strategy for Every Lesson* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD), see free sections of the book at www.ascd.org/publications; Janice F. Almasi “The Nature of Fourth Graders’ Sociocognitive Conflicts in Peer-led and Teacher-led Discussion of Literature,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 30 (1995): 314–351; Linda S. Levstik and Keith Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*: 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 1004); Walter Parker and John Jarolimek, *Social Studies in Elementary Education*: 10 ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997).
2. Scott L. Roberts, *Teaching Middle Level Social Studies: A Practical Guide for Teaching 4th-8th Grades* (Athens, GA: Digital Textbooks.biz, 2012); Scott L. Roberts, “Using the Circle of Knowledge Strategy to Facilitate Controversial Discussions,” *The Leader* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 1, 4, 6–8.
3. Silver, Strong, and Perini, 217–220. A preview of the chapter about the circle of knowledge is at www.ascd.org/publications/books/107059/chapters/Circle-of-Knowledge.aspx.
4. Silver, Strong, and Perini, 223–225. I’ve revised and enhanced these steps, and altered their sequence in the lesson planning.
5. Silver, Strong, and Perini, 223–224.
6. Roberts, 6.
7. Silver, Strong, and Perini, 224; When introducing the concept of symbols to your students, a great resource to use is the Brain Pop Jr. free preview film *American Symbols*, www.brainpopjr.com/socialstudies/citizenship/usymbols.

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