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## Resource Guide: *Leading a Group Discussion in Social Studies*

### **What is leading a group discussion in social studies?**

In a group discussion, the teacher and all of the students work on specific content together, using one another's ideas as resources. The purposes of a discussion are to build collective knowledge and capability in relation to specific instructional goals and to allow students to practice listening, speaking, and interpreting. The teacher and a wide range of students contribute orally, listen actively, and respond to and learn from others' contributions. *From Core Practice Consortium, 2014 and TeachingWorks, 2017.*

### **How can leading a group discussion advance justice?**

Facilitating group discussions is an intellectual and a democratic act. The discussions we envision feature participation from a broad array of students who are diverse in demographics, academic achievement, and point of view. Discussions are a place where students work together to consider different perspectives and construct understanding, regardless of students' social or academic status. At the same time, discussions can easily calcify societal inequities if particular students or perspectives are subconsciously or intentionally marginalized. To combat this risk, teachers keep particular ethical obligations in mind, ensure that all students have opportunities to voice their thinking, demonstrate respect for students' thinking, and press for consideration of alternative ideas. In other words, discussions can be a lever for redistributing power in the classroom.

### **Why work on leading a group discussion?**

Learning is fundamentally a social activity. People learn from talking through their existing ideas and listening to the ideas of others, especially when the ideas represent differing viewpoints. Furthermore, argumentation is central to the work of historians, geographers, political analysts, and economists, all people who might be considered experts in one of the major social studies disciplines. Through co-constructing ideas during a discussion, students can engage with valuable content and begin to see that social studies is a subject of ever-evolving interpretations rather than fixed truths. Students deserve the chance to create and defend their own arguments, and to consider and critique the interpretations of others. For novices, learning to lead a group discussion is a foundational practice for approaching social studies as inquiry, and builds on other instructional practices such as eliciting student thinking and setting up and managing small group work.

### **What is the role of leading a group discussion in the social studies classroom?**

Social studies inquiry lessons ideally give students opportunities to *Engage* in the inquiry, *Experience* analyzing social studies artifacts and *Argue* for or against interpretations through discussion or writing (a.k.a., the "EEA" framework). Discussion often takes place in small groups during the *Experience* portion of the lesson, and in whole-class groups during the *Argue* portion of the lesson. Discussion is particularly fruitful once students have had a chance to explore historical or social scientific sources, and discussions often revolve around the central question of the lesson, such as *Was Columbus a hero or a villain?* or *Should Civil War monuments remain or be removed?* After discussions, students are prepared to write arguments taking into account all they have learned from the sources and their peers.

Discussions in social studies often take on a specific structure. Examples of these structures include a Socratic Seminar, Structured Academic Controversy, or debate. In this resource, we use a Public Issues Exploration structure, where students grapple with a current civics or Constitutional history topic and sources of local or national relevance before discussing this issue as a group. Because of this choice, we engage novice teachers in a Public Issues Exploration as students (see Activity 1) and ask them to analyze Public Issues Explorations before leading one



in a classroom. Other forms of discussion can easily be used instead of the Public Issues Exploration throughout these activities.

### How do we represent this practice in social studies?

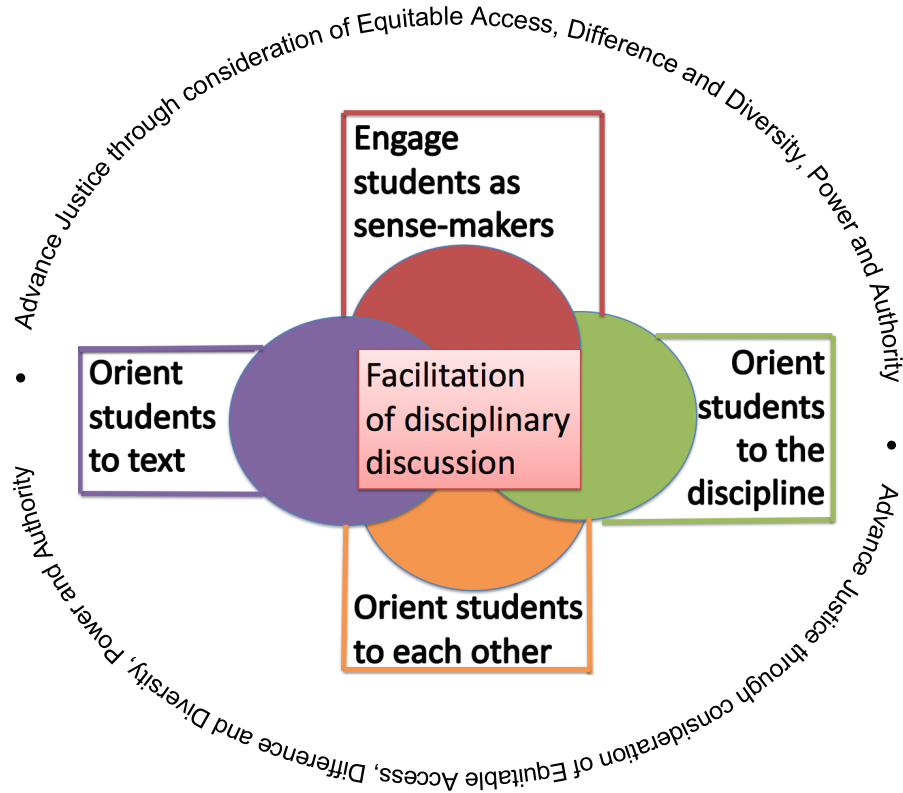


Figure from: Reisman, Kavanagh, Monte-Sano, Fogo, McGrew, Cipparone, & Simmons (2017). Facilitating whole-class discussions in history: A framework for preparing teacher candidates. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 69(3), 278-293. A product of the Core Practice Consortium.

Through work with the [Core Practice Consortium](#), Reisman and colleagues (2017) represented four *areas of work* (center Venn diagram) that are necessary to facilitating a rich discussion in social studies. Researchers identified these areas by analyzing the discussions that teacher candidates at two universities led in their field placement classrooms. You can learn more about these areas of work and their origins by reading the [article](#) published in the *Journal of Teacher Education* in 2017.

Even if you attend each of these areas of work, your discussion might lead to more learning for some students than others or reinforce traditional power structures in the classroom. Therefore, we also include three *ethical considerations* (outer circle) to guide teachers' work and advance justice while facilitating discussions. We explain each below with reference to video clips that can be found online [here](#).

**Engage students as sense-makers:** Ask students open-ended questions that have multiple possible answers, that prompt students to think about the content, and that demonstrate curiosity about students' ideas. This might include asking the central historical question or exploring a historical document. [In the first clip](#), the teacher has students make sense of a visual artifact from the Silk Road region in pairs before sharing their ideas to the class.

**Orient students to the text:** Orienting students to the text might include asking students to use textual evidence to support a claim, working with students to summarize or make sense of one text, or directing students to a particular part of the text. [In the second clip](#), the teacher guides students to identify texts and examples to support their claims about whether post-apartheid South Africa is living up to its promises.

**Orient students to each other:** This involves asking students to engage with each other's ideas. This might include referencing a student's idea, asking a student to rephrase or respond to an idea offered by one of their peers, or highlighting a student's idea for the class to consider. [In the third clip](#), the teacher has students agree and disagree with each other's ideas about the reliability of sources for learning about the ancient Silk Road. The teacher also connects multiple students' ideas to facilitate other students commenting on the contributions of their peers.

**Orient students to the discipline:** Orienting students to the discipline involves highlighting when students are doing or prompting students to do authentic disciplinary work. This might include asking questions that rely on disciplinary ways of reading and writing, highlighting the claim-evidence structure of historical arguments, or making a comment about what it means to study history or social sciences. Revisiting the first clip, at 1:30 the teacher highlights the work of one student who changed her interpretation after hearing new information as a key way that historians think. In the same clip at 2:11, the teacher highlights students' disciplinary work in comparing multiple sources.

**Equitable Access:** All students should have access to discussions in social studies. Examples of attending to equitable access might include the following:

- Giving all students a chance to participate through quick “turn and talks”
- Modifying questions to provide entry points for all students
- Highlighting contributions from students with less power and authority
- Providing visuals to help students track on the discussion

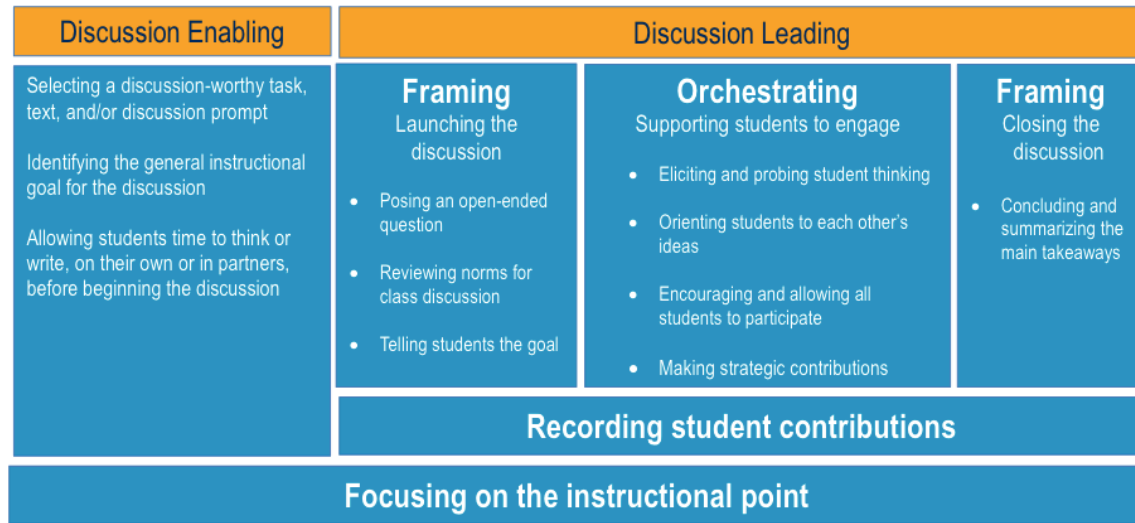
**Difference and Diversity:** Discussions in social studies should value and bring out diverse perspectives. Examples of attending to difference and diversity might include the following:

- Choosing content representative of diverse social groups and identities, or voices that are underrepresented in social studies curriculum
- Encouraging students to challenge one another's ideas
- Questioning perspectives in historical text
- Recognizing that students' participation patterns may vary based on their cultural backgrounds

**Power and Authority:** Discussions in social studies can invert traditional power structures of whose voices are heard and valued. Examples of attending to power and authority might include the following:

- Noticing how often the teacher speaks and how often students speak
- Changing the teacher's location in the room (i.e., away from the front)
- Questioning the reliability of authors and sources in text
- Orienting discussion around student ideas
- Considering when to revoice a student's idea or when to let their idea stand on its own
- Assessing the way diverse social identities are portrayed in the text and in the classroom

### How do we decompose the practice into learnable parts?



In the chart below, we map our Social Studies conception of discussion (middle column) onto the TeachingWorks areas of work in discussion (left column). All of the history/social science areas of work occur across the various TeachingWorks areas of work. Each social studies example in the right-hand column corresponds to an aspect of the TeachingWorks areas of work. In the right-hand column, parentheses label which History/Social Science area of work the example represents.

TeachingWorks Area of Work	History/Social Science Area of Work	Example of what this might involve in Social Studies
1. Launching the discussion	Engage students as Sensemakers	• Asking the central question (Sensemakers, Discipline)
2. Supporting students to engage intellectually in the discussion	Orient students to the Text Orient students to Each Other	• Asking students to turn and talk about what they notice about the text (Text, Each Other)
3. Focusing the discussion in productive territory and moving it toward the instructional goal	Orient students to the Discipline	• Asking a student to rephrase a particularly important idea that another student shared (Discipline, Each Other)
4. Making a public, usable record of discussion		• Underlining parts in the text that students use as evidence to support an argument (Sensemakers, Text)
5. Closing the discussion		• Prompting students to use textual evidence and their peers' ideas to record their final thinking about the central question (Sensemakers, Text, Each Other, Discipline)

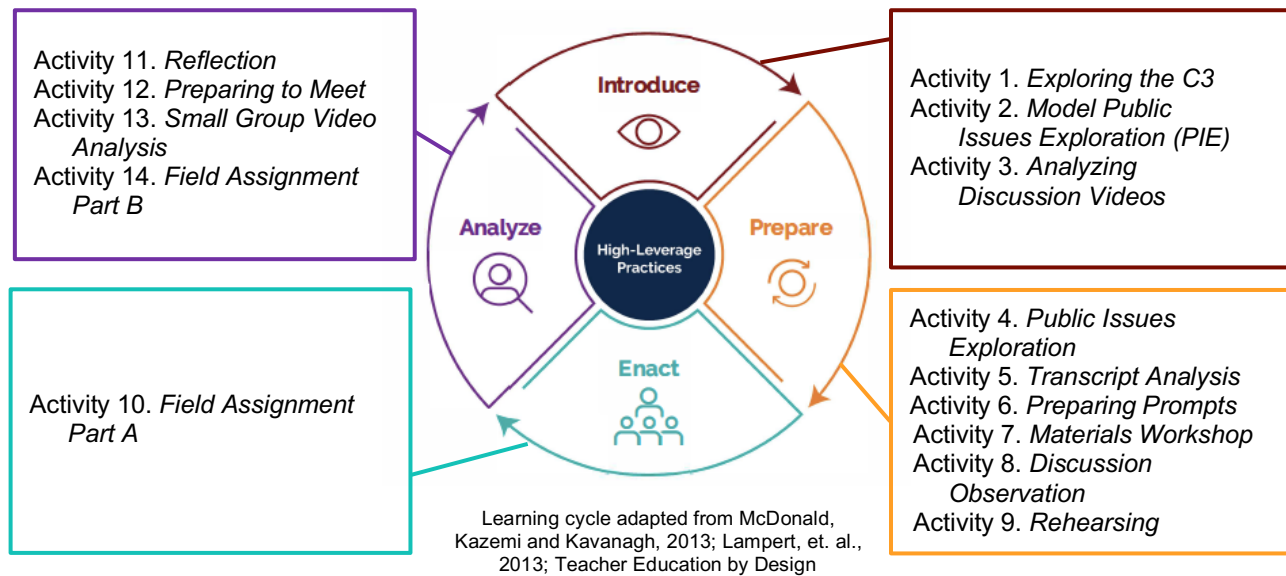
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## Supporting Novice Teachers

In the social studies methods course at the University of Michigan, we provide examples of teachers leading discussions in order to represent discussion facilitation as a practice focused on generating student talk and co-construction of ideas rather than teacher-centered talk. When novices try leading discussions on their own, we often find that novices engage students as sensemakers and orient students to the text, but struggle to orient students to each other or to the discipline. We have found it important to help novices lead discussions in ways that move students towards a learning goal rather than simply encouraging open sharing, and we use central inquiry questions that teachers ask multiple times throughout the lesson as a way to focus lessons on those learning goals.



## Learning Cycle



The activities listed in this cycle need not be enacted in order, though it may make sense to go through the four quadrants sequentially. The most time-consuming of these for novices will be the field assignment where novices model for small groups in their classroom

### Introduce

#### Activity #1: Exploring the C3

In order for discussions to be productive, teachers must have instructional goals in mind that are important to disciplinary learning. This ensures that students will grapple with content that is worthwhile for their development. The C3 Framework for Social Studies Standards is one such source of worthwhile content that has been developed by experts in history, civics, geography, and economics.

We recommend giving students an experience exploring the C3 Framework before asking them to choose standards from the C3 to guide the lesson they teach. In this vein, this activity asks students to explore the C3 with an eye to simply orienting themselves to the document and what it consists of. This activity could also be tailored so that it's done outside of class or with other segments of our teacher education curriculum.

#### Activity #2: Model Public Issues Exploration (PIE)

This activity will be novice teachers' first exposure to the Public Issues Exploration, a discussion structure we use in social studies methods courses. In this lesson, *you* (the teacher educator) will teach the lesson while teacher candidates act as students. We think this model is most effective if you match classroom conditions as closely as possible. For example, you could make sure it lasts no more than 45 minutes and ask novices to time you. You could also have novices (your students, in this case) transition from their seats to the rug and back; anything to make the lesson feel more like a P-12 classroom.

**Activity #3: Analyzing Discussion Videos**

This activity asks novices to analyze a discussion video using our social studies framework for discussion, introduced above. Teacher candidates could watch the videos on their own or in pairs via the links embedded in the documents, or you could watch and debrief together as a class.

**Prepare****Activity #4: What Makes a Good Public Issues Exploration?**

In this activity, novices study Public Issues Explorations taught by previous novice teachers. In doing so, they look at sample lesson plans and rubrics, trying to understand what previous novices have done to plan their discussions well. There are two lessons included here. You might have novices analyze one or both of the lessons before discussing them in small groups or the whole class.

**Activity #5: Discussion Transcript Analysis**

In this lesson, novices see a lesson plan and part of what transpired in the lesson through reading the lesson transcript. They use the lesson transcript to identify different areas of work involved in facilitating a discussion. It might be productive to have novices discuss the lesson and the transcript in small groups or pairs before sharing out in the whole group.

**Activity #6: Preparing Prompts with the Discussion Framework**

We think that it is important for novices to take up the work of *leading a group discussion* in a way that feels natural to them. With this in mind, this activity encourages novices to generate questions that would help students engage in the four areas of work outlined by the Discussion Framework. We imagine starting this activity in small groups and having novices list ideas together in small groups. The lesson might conclude by having the novices make a "back pocket" note card with their favorite discussion moves.

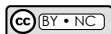
Of course, you will want to be sure to challenge ideas for prompts that might confuse students or shut down their sensemaking. The point of this activity is that facilitating a discussion is complex work, and having prompts for stimulating a discussion is supportive of novice teacher's early attempts at this practice.

**Activity #7: Discussion Materials Workshop**

We have found that in order for novices to focus on enactment rather than lesson planning during rehearsals (an activity in Quadrant 3), it is important for novice to have an opportunity to "workshop" their discussion materials. Otherwise, rehearsals can become largely focused on preparation rather than the in-the-moment decision-making that is one of the hardest parts of enacting a discussion. In this activity, novices will be prompted to bring materials for their discussion lesson and share them with classmates – and preferably a teacher educator – for comment.

**Activity #8: Observing a Live Discussion**

The main point of this activity is helping novices realize the many dilemmas involved in leading a discussion. This activity has novices observe a discussion in a classroom and talk to the teacher after the discussion. This classroom might be in a school where you hold your teacher education course for the day, or in their field placement classroom. Either way, we recommend having multiple novices sit in on any given discussion to illustrate how different people may have different perceptions of the same discussion.

**Activity #9: Rehearsing Discussion**

This rehearsal revolves around the Public Issues Exploration, which is a field assignment described below. In our experience, it is important to give novices time to pull together resources for their lesson, receive feedback on these resources and their central question, and revise their lesson before a rehearsal. That way, the focus of rehearsals can center on lesson enactment. In a rehearsal of a discussion, most novices take on the role of students for the discussion portion of the lesson while others take on the role of teacher. Rehearsals of discussion are particularly challenging because novices must offer ideas that are age appropriate for young students. One way to address this challenge is to provide novices with pre-planned or “planted” misconceptions to offer from the role of a student

### Enact

#### **Activity #10: Field Assignment – Creating and Teaching a Public Issues Exploration**

This field assignment is intended to give novices an experience leading a full lesson – or series of lessons – that engage students in thinking about, discussing, and taking action on public issues. It is helpful to introduce this field assignment to novices well before it is due so that they have time to consult with their mentor teachers on the ideal topic and develop the lesson. We have often modeled a Public Issues Exploration for novices before sending them off to do one. To this effect, a model Public Issues Exploration is included as an activity in Introduce section of the Learning Cycle.

### Analyze

#### **Activity #11: What Makes a Good Reflection?**

This activity provides examples of reflections on Public Issues Explorations from past novices so that novices have models of what their reflections might look like and the kinds of reflections that support their learning to facilitate discussions. Novices are prompted to study the reflections for what aspects they might emulate when they reflect on their own Public Issues Exploration and develop their understanding of discussion facilitation in the coming days.

#### **Activity #12: Reflecting on the Public Issues Exploration with Mentors, Coaches, or Field Instructors**

This activity will help novices prepare for a discussion with their mentors, coaches, or field instructors. Novices can complete this activity in advance of their debrief with their mentor. The more time novices spend reflecting before these meetings, the more teacher candidates will get out of them.

#### **Activity #13: Small Group Video Analysis of Public Issues Exploration**

This activity is designed to help novices reflect on their discussion facilitation when they enacted their field assignment (the Public Issues Exploration) and provide feedback to one of their colleagues. This activity allows novices to follow steps as they reflect on their work, as well as questions to help them begin to think about their teaching practice.

#### **Activity #14: Personal Analysis and Reflection on Public Issues Exploration**

Once novices facilitate a discussion with children by completing the fieldwork component of this assignment (that is, a video recording their Public Issues Exploration), they should watch the video and analyze their strengths and weaknesses at *leading a group discussion*. Novices should then identify concrete next steps they will take to improve their facilitation of discussions. Included in this assignment are examples of novice’s reflections.





### RELEVANT READINGS FOR NOVICE TEACHERS

- Cohen, R. (1998). Making cooperative learning equitable. *Educational leadership*, 56(1).
- Hess, D. E. (2004). Discussion in social studies: Is it worth the trouble? *Social Education*, 68(2), 151-157.
- Parker, W. C., & Hess, D. (2001). Teaching with and for discussion. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(3), 273-289
- Parker, W. (2003). Learning to lead discussions. *Teaching democracy*. New York: Teachers College Press.

### REFERENCES AND READINGS FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS

- Cohen, E. G., & Lotan, R. A. (1995). Producing equal-status interaction in the heterogeneous classroom. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(1), 99-120.
- Grossman, P. (2018). *Teaching core practices in teacher education*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.
- Reisman, A., Kavanagh, S. S., Monte-Sano, C., Fogo, B., McGrew, S. C., Cipparone, P., & Simmons, E. (2017). Facilitating whole-class discussions in history: A framework for preparing teacher candidates. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 69(3), 278-293.

