

Discussing Politics in Polarized Times: How Structure Can Help

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In a recent interview, Erin reflected on how her beliefs about classroom discussion have changed since she became a social studies teacher 18 years ago.¹ She recalls that as a novice teacher she did not often allow students to discuss political issues, for fear of losing control, “I think that hesitation was not knowing what the conversations were going to be like, because I think I was uncomfortable with, ‘If this [situation] comes up, how do I handle it?’” Though she has grown in her ability to facilitate discussions, she has a new concern: how to select the topics to include and whether that [topic] “is too far for a parent.” In her experience, it is the political climate that drives this worry, “When I first started teaching, I just don’t think we were as polarized.”

There is little argument that social studies teachers like Erin are facing increased external pressures, particularly when it comes to introducing controversial topics and issues.² There are no easy answers as to how teachers should cope with the current political climate. There are, however, tools that can help teachers feel more comfortable and competent in designing discussions on public policy issues, while also building students’ skills for civil discourse.

For the past several years, we have been studying students engaged in structured, student-centered discussions. In student-centered discussion, nearly all of the student talk is directed toward other students. The teacher sets up the activity, keeps time, checks in with groups, and monitors the norms. We have found that these sorts of discussions, which include formats like Structured

Academic Controversy, small group deliberation, and team debate, have many benefits for students and teachers. Here, we briefly discuss these studies and then highlight the ways in which structured discussion alleviates many of the common fears teachers have about bringing political issues into the classroom.

The Studies

We have partnered with two different civic education organizations to study three different student-centered discussion designs. See Table 1 on p. 25 for a comparison of these designs.

In one study, we worked with the Close Up Foundation. Close Up is a non-profit that annually brings 20,000 high school and middle school students from all 50 states and U.S. territories to Washington, D.C., for a weeklong, place-based study of the federal government. During a program week, students are put into geographically diverse groups of 20 and participate in two discussions of public policy issues. One is small group deliberation in which participants consider different policy positions and try to come to a consensus. The other is a team debate in which students read about two sides of an issue and then form two teams who engage in a back-and-forth exchange. The goal is to be declared the winner by a panel of their peers.

Our data collection occurred during two program weeks—one in 2019 and the other in 2022. Data included surveying 281 students before and after these discussions, observing and videotaping the activities, and interviewing 31 participants.



Students participate in a small group deliberation.

The second study was done in partnership with Street Law, Inc., using a deliberation strategy. Street Law is a non-profit that produces free law and public policy related classroom materials. Deliberations follow the format for Structured Academic Controversy (SAC), originally designed by Johnson and Johnson.³ In a SAC, students work in groups of four to learn about competing positions on a policy issue. Using the provided texts, one pair in the group presents the best reasons for their assigned side while the opposite team takes notes. This process is then repeated by the other team. Upon completion, pairs reverse positions and present new reasons for each side. Finally, the two teams drop their roles and discuss possible consensus positions within their group of four.

Table 1. **Differences Between Structured Deliberation, Structured Academic Controversy, and Group Debate**

Strategy	Deliberation	Debate	
Format	“Close Up” Deliberation	Structured Academic Controversy	Team Debate
Open Public Policy Question	Framed to invite a range of options . Example: What actions (if any) should the government take to address climate change?	Framed to set up two sides of an issue. Example: Should voting be compulsory in our country?	Framed to set up two sides (pro/con) of an issue. Example: Should our state’s minimum wage be raised to \$15/hour?
Background Materials	Students receive materials that explain the issue and multiple policy options .	Students are provided with materials that explain reasons for and against .	Students receive materials that explain the issue and read reasons for and against .
Groups	Students work in randomly assigned small groups of 5-6 or groups purposefully assigned to include students who will likely disagree.	Student pairs are randomly assigned to a side of the issue and are matched with a pair studying the opposite side of the issue.	Students first divide into two like-minded teams to develop their best reasons and arguments. They then face-off in a whole-class debate between two groups.
Moments of required participation	Opening share out and closing share out.	Pairs given two minutes to represent their reasons . Other pair listens. Then, roles reverse.	Each person must stand and speak for 30 seconds.
Aim of the activity	Consensus: To develop a policy that the small group can all endorse.	Collaboration: To become familiar with competing views about an issue. Work together to become more informed.	Win: To be on the team that is declared the winner.

Data collection for this study took place in spring 2023 with 26 middle and high school teachers in two states, who had completed a Street Law professional development before leading more than 400 students through two Street Law deliberations. Students took pre-post surveys, and we interviewed six participating teachers.

For both studies, we were interested in how the structure of the discussion affected students' opinions about the issues being discussed and whether the students experienced the discussion as inclusive and fair to competing points of view. In what follows, we discuss our findings as they relate to some common concerns that teachers have about bringing politics into the classroom.

Concern #1: Only a handful of students actually want to discuss politics.

Reality: Structure equalizes participation.

Mara, a teacher participating in the Street Law study, voiced a common concern among teachers who try to facilitate whole-class, minimally structured discussions: "You've got some students who just dominate conversations, and then you've got some students who won't speak."

After completing the Street Law professional development and using its SAC materials, Mara realized that believing some students do not want to participate "underestimates" them. She noticed that students needed support in learning how to participate and that "they can handle it, if they know the rules." In fact, a major benefit of SAC is that students are required to speak and required to listen for specific amounts of time. Those who are prone to dominating are compelled to listen, and those who hesitate to speak are given time to learn about an issue and prepare their thoughts. By the end of the activity, every student has equally participated.

The Close Up team debate format is even more high stakes. Once teams have had time to read and prepare arguments, each person is required to stand and speak to their position for 30 seconds. Walter Parker has labeled these moments as creating "productive anxiety".⁴ By this, he means requiring a level of participation that may be mildly uncomfortable but results in more engagement. Close Up participants often described experiencing productive anxiety. After the debate,



Courtesy of Close Up

A student presents his statement during the team debate.

one student, Silvia, reflected, "I don't like public speaking. [It] is kind of nerve-wracking. But you know, it was okay. It wasn't too bad since I'd already gotten to know most people in the room." Another student, Jenna, said she was "terrified" of the debate, but that "talking with everybody" and putting their ideas together helped build her confidence.

Like SAC, the required time to speak during the team debate meant that at the end of the activity everyone had spoken for equal time. It also created an atmosphere of collectively doing something hard. When debates are over, groups applaud each other, give hugs, and debrief challenging moments—like athletes after a competition.

Survey responses show that these structures bring new voices into the discussion. After each activity, we asked students whether they had participated in the discussion more than they usually would. After the Close Up deliberation, 68% agreed; after the debate, 51% agreed. For students in Maryland who engaged in the SAC, 20% reported that they had participated more and about half reported the same level of participation. These students had teachers who had been

trained in scaffolding for discussion, which may account for the lower numbers.

Concern #2: Discussions will get too heated.

Reality: Structured discussions reinforce norms of civility.

In light of heightened polarization, many educators fear that discussions will give way to heated arguments. However, we found that structured, student-centered discussions reinforced norms of civility. One reason for this is that structured discussions are designed to give students practice with specific skills such as repeating before disagreeing, drawing upon common evidence to support an argument, and active listening.

The SAC is designed to be a collaborative learning experience in which students are assigned to represent a view before they are asked to share their personal opinion. In fact, students do not say what they think about the issue until the last 10 minutes of the 50-minute activity. This practice prioritizes learning about a range of opinions before defending your own.

Teachers who used the SAC found that this structure normalized disagreement. Erin noticed that her students seemed comfortable with expressing and hearing disparate opinions, saying, “They may not have agreed with each other, but they listened to each other.... They didn’t disrespect each other.” This was echoed by fellow Street Law teacher Sam, whose students reported that “they felt really safe having different opinions.” This is not to say that conversations will never become tense, but the structure helps students know when they have crossed a line. Jennifer described when a student who felt very strongly about guns had a moment of “rage,” but that he quickly self-regulated and apologized for not following the parameters of the activity.

The Close Up public policy deliberation activity has students working in groups of 5-6 for about 45 minutes. Because students need to do a lot of self-regulation in these groups, the activity begins with a structured sharing of views in which one member reads a set of survey questions related to the issue and asks everyone to weigh-in. For example, on the issue of whether the voting age should be lowered, participants are asked to what extent they agree with the prompt, “Most people

my age would vote responsibly if permitted.” This non-threatening moment of required sharing ensures that everyone has an opportunity to speak and be heard several times before digging deeper into the issue.

We found that this small warm-up created a lot of comfort within the activity. Kayla reported that she does not usually want to share ideas, but that the deliberation empowered her to feel at ease expressing her opinion, adding that she felt everyone else in her group was also “very comfortable giving ideas.”

Given how much time students are working in minimally monitored groups, teachers might worry about students becoming uncivil. However, the opposite is true. We found that in the post-surveys for the Close Up deliberation, 87% felt that their ideas were respected, and 72% reported that they liked how the activity was structured. Responses from high school students in Maryland, who participated in a Street Law SAC, tell a similar story; 67% felt that their ideas were respected, and 62% reported that they liked how the activity was structured.

Concern #3: Students’ opinions are as entrenched as adults.

Reality: Young people are interested in how their peers think and are willing to modify their views.

Given the hyper-partisan rhetoric in the United States among adults and elected officials, it is tempting to assume that young people today are adopting similar attitudes. Yet when we asked participants in the Close Up study to identify their ideological leanings, we were struck that about 50% of students identified as moderate or unsure. Fewer than 20% identified as either a “strong” liberal or “strong” conservative.

When we interviewed students, we asked them how they would describe their political views; and even students who answered with a party or ideological label often had trouble explaining what the labels meant. As a fairly typical example, when Ivy was asked to explain what it means to be liberal, she said, “I don’t really know. I mean, I support Biden, I guess?” She was able to identify abortion and Black Lives Matter as issues that she cares about, and this reflects some understanding about

partisan belief. Overall, the interviews showed that students are political novices who are trying to sort out how political party, ideology, and issues fit together.

This emerging understanding of politics is an educational asset, because it makes students curious to learn more. The Close Up interviewees were eager to hear how their peers think. Gwen, for example, participated in a deliberation about college affordability and wanted to “learn all of the things and all the different viewpoints.” Dylan entered his climate change deliberation believing that humans were not causing rising temperatures, but said he “wanted to hear other people’s opinions.”

The Street Law teachers report a similar openness among their Gen Z students. Mara believes “this whole generation ... is more open-minded” and estimates that “90-93% [of my students]... come from houses where they are encouraged to think.” Jennifer finds her students “tolerant and loving ... more so than generations before.” Indeed, early research on Gen Z shows that they hold views similar to Millennials in that they are concerned about climate change, more accepting of diverse identities related to gender and sexual identity, believe that racism is a current issue, and want the government to take a more active role in solving problems.⁵

We have previously published findings investigating how different discussion strategies affect students’ opinions. By asking the Close Up students their views on issues before and after their participation in various forms of political discussion, we find evidence that students do modify their views and that the discussion structure matters. In the deliberations, which end with students coming to consensus about a policy they can endorse, we find that student views pre and post move toward each other. For example, when students participated in a deliberation on the topic of an assault weapons ban, they began more polarized but moved more toward a consensus position afterwards. Alternatively, when students participate in a debate, their views may move away from each other and into two different camps. As one example, when participating in a debate about concealed carry, students overall started with a centrist position and after the debate carved out



Photo: Taylor Mendoza/Courtesy of Street Law, Inc.

A community deliberation led by teachers at Northglenn High School in Colorado.

two more pronounced positions, representing both the left and right spectrums.⁶ This is not to say that large numbers of students “flip” positions, but many shift along a continuum. This shows that some change is happening, and that the change differs within different structures.

Conclusion

It is easy to fall back on platitudes when it comes to discussing political topics in the classroom. The idea that students will not engage or will get too emotional in political discussions is certainly pervasive, as is the assertion that discussing opposing viewpoints is not going to change anyone’s mind. We have found, however, that providing thoughtful structure and norms for political discussions, as described above, not only challenges such preconceived ideas about discussing politics in the classroom, but that it encourages students to productively disagree and to begin to understand the “other side.”

We feel that tools such as these are more necessary than ever. We are living in an era in which the ideological middle has disappeared from politics,⁷ and our own representatives seem to be abandoning norms of civility,⁸ but we do not concede that teaching students to hold respectful discussions across disagreements is a lost cause.

Through researching structured methods of political discussions such as SACs, Close-up deliberations, and debates, we have seen that teachers and students alike are able to participate in these discussions with interest, respect, and even curiosity about diverse perspectives. ■

Notes

1. All of the names of teachers and students in this article are pseudonyms.
2. Madeline Will, “Scared, Anxious, Worried: States’ New Restrictions Have Teachers on Edge,” *Education Weekly* (Jan. 25, 2023).
3. David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, “Classroom Conflict: Controversy versus Debate in Learning Groups,” *American Educational Research Journal* 22, no. 2 (Jan. 1, 1985): 237–56; David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, “Conflict in the Classroom: Controversy and Learning,” *Review of Educational Research* 49, no. 1 (March 1, 1979): 51–69.
4. Walter C. Parker, “Structured Academic Controversy: What It Can Be,” in *Making Discussions Work*, ed. Jane C. Lo (Teachers College Press, 2022), 73–89.
5. Kim Parker, Nikki Graf, and Ruth Igielnik, “Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues,” Pew Research Center press release (Jan. 17, 2019).
6. Paula McAvoy and Gregory E. McAvoy, “Can Debate and Deliberation Reduce Partisan Divisions? Evidence from

a Study of High School Students,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 96, no. 3 (May 27, 2021): 275–84.

7. Drew Desilver, “The Polarization in Today’s Congress Has Roots That Go Back Decades,” Pew Research Center (April 22, 2022).
8. Sarah Burns, “In Congress, Breaking Unwritten Rules That Encouraged Civility and Enabled Things to Get Done Is Becoming the New Normal,” *The Conversation*, n.d., <https://theconversation.com/us>.

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Resources and Additional Readings

- Street Law, Inc. has a variety of issues and readings designed for middle and high school courses using the Deliberation/SAC strategy. <https://store.streetlaw.org/deliberations>.
- To preview and purchase Close Up’s classroom resources on current issues, see www.closeup.org/resources-and-pd/current-issues.
- Avery, Patricia G., Sara A. Levy, and Annette Simmons. “Deliberating Controversial Public Issues As Part of Civic Education.” *The Social Studies* 104, no. 3 (May 1, 2013): 105–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2012.691571>.
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- McAvoy, Paula and Arine Lowrey. “Structure Matters: Comparing Deliberation and Debate.” *Making Classroom Discussions Work: Methods for Quality Dialogue in the Social Studies* (Jan. 28, 2022).
- Nathan, Edward P. and Christine Kim-Eng Lee. “Using Structured Academic Controversies in the Social Studies Classroom.” *Teaching and Learning* 25, no. 2 (Jan. 1, 2004): 171–88. <https://repository.nie.edu.sg/bitstream/10497/336/1/TL-25-2-171.pdf>.
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