Influences on Social Studies Teachers' Use of Classroom Discussion

BRUCE E. LARSON

Social studies, with its connection to social interaction and civic participation, is thought to benefit from classroom discussion (Engle and Ochoa 1988; Gross and Zeleny 1958). Forty years ago, Gross and Zeleny (1958) emphasized the specific role of social studies in teaching classroom discussion this way: "Since adult organizations so often make decisions with respect to policy by means of the discussion method it is difficult for a teacher of the social studies to over-emphasize [discussion techniques and procedures] in the classroom" (484).

In a summary of the literature about the use of discussion in instruction, Gall (1985) pointed out that discussion is an effective way to promote higher-level thinking, develop student attitudes, and advance student capability for moral reasoning. Discussion provides opportunities for students to be thoughtful about the information they have received in class (Newmann 1988). Discussion has been characterized as a structured conversation among participants who present, examine, compare, and understand similar and diverse ideas about an issue (Wilen and White 1991). Even with these known benefits, discussion occurs infrequently in classrooms.

My objective is to develop an explanatory theory of influences on teachers' use of classroom discussion. A theory of this sort should be useful for studying the persistence of recitation under the guise of discussion and for improving instruction with classroom discussion.

In my earlier study (Larson 1997), I concluded that teachers' thinking about classroom discussion is complex; teachers have multiple conceptions of classroom discussion; and a number of factors influence the type of discussion they use. Those influencing factors appear to be integral to their conceptions. I decided to take a second look at the data to seek a clearer understanding of the factors that affect teachers' use of discussion, as a means to promote more frequent use of that strategy.

Literature

The Persistence of Recitation over Discussion

Teacher questioning that is similar to recitation is widely used and accepted in schools. Real discussion does not appear to be used by teachers very often, and teachers likely misuse the term *discussion* when they are really referring to lectures, recitations, or other types of teacher-dominated classroom interaction (Dillon 1984). Teachers describe discussion favorably as a method of instruction that encourages students and teacher to interact together about a particular issue. But recitation persists (Goodlad 1984; Hoetker and Ahlbrand 1969; Stodolsky, Ferguson, and Wimpelberg 1981) and is "seemingly invulnerable to repeated criticisms" (Cazden 1988, 30). Often, junior and senior high school teachers and college teachers claim that their recitations are really discussions.

Using recitation instead of discussion provides teachers with a greater sense of control over the classroom. Discussion may require teachers to relinquish to students more of their authority over the instructional process than does recitation or questioning. Although discussion takes many different forms in the classroom (Dillon 1988; Larson 1997; Roby 1988), it requires

Bruce E. Larson is an assistant professor of teacher education and social studies at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. *This article originally appeared in* The Social Studies, *May/June 1999, pgs. 125–132. Reprinted with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. Published by Heldref Publications, 1319 18th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-1802.* *Copyright 1999.*

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some degree of talk by the students as well as the teacher. Wood and Wood (1988) found that teachers could control opportunities for student participation by the questions they asked; they could control who talked and the content of the talk. Recitation "[e]nsures that children are unlikely to diverge from the teacher's line of thought" (Wood and Wood 1988, 294). However, Wood and Wood concluded that a consequence of this insurance was that teacher questions stifled student initiative and served more as a form of group control than as a stimulus for thought.

Although recitation can challenge students to use information above low-level thinking (e.g., by asking "why" or "how" questions), it typically limits opportunities for students to use higher-level thinking skills because of its tendency toward rapid questioning and constant teacher evaluation of student responses. Discussion research reveals that increases in teacher/student interactions may produce concern about teaching a specific curriculum in a predetermined time period (Gall 1985; Gall and Gall 1990; Wilen 1990; Wilen and White 1991). These factors may lead teachers to use less-interactive methods of instruction. This research does not fully reveal teachers' thinking about which aspects of discussion cause concern about losing control of the classroom or what characteristics of discussion cause them to see it as ineffective for teaching a curriculum emphasizing facts and skills.

Possibilities of Classroom Discussion in Democracies

If citizens are to engage in discussions that allow for the development of opinions and positions on issues common to a group, then competence in the skills of discussion is required. Why do public discussions of important issues affecting families, communities, and the nation occur so infrequently? No simple answer is possible. However, one of the many reasons for a lack of talk could be that citizenship does not require the skill or the know-how to engage in public talk about important policies or issues (Barber 1989, 1984). Discussion skills include listening, making claims clearly, supporting claims with facts, helping a group move through obstacles, presenting a critique of ideas and not individuals (keeping a high respect for human dignity), and developing together a shared understanding of the problem or issue (Barber 1984; Mathews 1994; Parker 1996). If skill in discussion can enhance public talk among democratic citizens, then we should identify discussion skills.

The educational systems of democratic societies serve a vital role in developing discussion abilities in children. Bridges (1987) stated,

> [I]t seems reasonable to expect that an education which is intended, among other things perhaps, to initiate young people into (democratic) processes should include preparation in the art of discussion or more specifically those forms of discussion associated with the processes of deliberation and decision making. (35)

The classroom, thought of as a laboratory of democracy (Dewey 1916), can teach students of different race, gender, social status, and ability to engage one another in discussions about issues of common concern. The classroom is an appropriate location to develop democratic character because it can become what Rosenblum calls a "diverse social identity group" (1994, 87). Some of the benefits of schools as laboratories of democracy are not likely to be accomplished if diverse students do not interact with one another in the classroom.

Rather than observing teachers, I decided that examining their thinking might provide insight into the age-old complaint about the persistence of recitation over discussion. The primary research question for the study was: What components of the educational setting (teacher, students, subject matter, and atmosphere) influence a teacher's planning and his or her use of discussion?

Method

Teachers/Informants

For this study, I selected a purposive sample of six high school social studies teachers. All claimed to use discussion as part of their teaching strategies, and all were nominated by their principals as being thoughtful and effective teachers. Teaching assignments were similar, with each participant teaching one or more high school social studies courses in world history, United States history, current events, American government, sociology, or psychology.

The participants taught at one of two types of schools: a suburban, primarily Caucasian, high school (three teachers) or an urban (inner city), racially diverse high school (three teachers). The teachers at the suburban high school taught either "regular track" or honors classes. In the article, I refer to them as Alex, Bill, and Cathy. The teachers at the urban high school taught either "low track," "regular track," or honors classes. Their names are Deborah, Elaine, and Frank.

Data Gathering

Data were of two kinds: responses to interviews and responses during a think-aloud task. Interviews preceded the think-aloud task. In the interview, the teachers spoke directly about their conceptions and definitions of discussion. They described the mental image that came to mind when they heard the term *classroom discussion*, distinguished between an ideal discussion and an imperfect one, gave examples of discussion, and listed educational rationales for discussion. The think-aloud exercise was an additional technique to explore these teachers' notions of ideal discussions. Following

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a technique suggested by Anderson (1980), I composed five vignettes of classroom interaction, each a paragraph long, that drew on Roby's (1988) five-level model of discussion. Each vignette described a classroom discussion in one of five teachers' classrooms. (The vignettes were presented and described further in a previous article [Larson 1997]). The teachers were asked to order the vignettes from the one most like a discussion in their classroom to the one least like, thinking aloud and sharing their reasoning as they ranked the vignettes.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data in four stages. First, I generated categories by examining the collected data and attempting to identify common themes. That was the constructive phase of data analysis during which I read the transcriptions and created initial categories. The second stage involved the integration of categories and their properties. During that stage, I compared similarities and differences among the categories created in stage one. Some categories combined with others that had similar properties. The third stage further integrated the data around fewer, more-encompassing categories. That process entailed creating new categories, refining (sharpening) categories, and elaborating (further illustrating) existing categories. The first three stages did not necessarily follow this linear progression. Typical of this method of analysis, the stages formed a repetitious process of coding, comparing, and refining (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The constant comparison of data led to the fourth stage of data analysis: writing a "theory in-process" of teachers' conceptions of discussion. Those conceptions, abstracted from the data, were then available for comparisons with other samples that provided additional sources of data.

"Students are reading less and less. If they are going to read less, then they are going to have to discuss more."

Findings

Teachers are aware that discussion requires student involvement. When they plan discussion, they reflect on factors that may hinder or enhance student participation. Five factors influence teachers' uses of different conceptions of discussion: student diversity, lesson objectives, age and maturity of students, sense of community in the classroom, and interest level of students. According to the canons of the grounded-theory approach, I present these as *hypotheses* that are *grounded* in data and *tentative*, pending additional rounds of data gathering and analysis. As such, they provide an initial layer of understanding about the thinking of teachers as they consider planning for discussion and teaching by that method. Because they are hypotheses, I use the present tense and speak generally of "teachers" rather than of "these six teachers." Each influencing factor is presented along with segments from the interview and the think-aloud transcripts. I provide data to illustrate each category and to reveal how the categories were developed.

Student Diversity

Teachers consider student diversity—in areas such as cultural background, ethnicity, gender, race, learning styles, and ability—both positively and negatively. Diversity offers the potential for increased awareness of different perspectives and ideas. Students with different backgrounds may provide a wide range of viewpoints about an issue. Diversity also has social benefits. Three teachers saw the classroom as a location in which students were required to interact with classmates with whom they typically do not interact during the school day. A diverse classroom could be the only place students will hear perspectives and opinions that differ from their own point of view.

In contrast to those positive benefits, the teachers interviewed think that student diversity increases conflict and disagreement when students question and challenge one another. That is often the result because students do not understand other students who are different from them, be it in point of view or ability level. The teachers report that they talk more and begin to dominate the classroom interactions when their students become embroiled in conflict. By limiting student talk, teachers control the voicing of different ideas and opinions.

Whereas student differences seem to affect the teacher during discussions, they also lead teachers to plan lessons differently from class to class. In mentioning the diversity of students and personalities in his classroom, Frank recalled that although he often planned to have the same discussion in two different classes, it did not necessarily happen that way: "Even though there are only two or three different courses, everything seems to be different with each of my classes." Similarly, Alex said, "Classrooms have personalities. I can't do the same thing with one class that I can do with the other; it's just the mix."

Part of the mix has to do with the interactions between boys and girls. The teachers encourage equal participation from both genders by altering instructional techniques. Bill was quite direct about gender,

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commenting that boys talk more frequently, but when girls do talk, it is after more reflection. He explained that "boys tend to just spout off and not necessarily think through what they are going to say, whereas girls really have thought through it ahead of time." He attempted to overcome the high frequency of talk from boys by directing his comments to girls and telling his classes about his observations of gender differences during discussions.

Elaine's comments were not different than the others. "Women aren't as willing to voice opinions. I think that unless you teach the boys to listen to the girls, and teach the girls to speak, we won't lose the gender thing." She mentioned that girls may feel especially intimidated when they are in discussions with exuberant, loud boys. She recounted a time when two girls were asked to give an opinion after three loud boys gave theirs: "You hardly heard the girls who followed them. They were real quiet, real hurried, as if they didn't think anybody was listening."

Gender is not the only difference the teachers notice among their students. Teachers think that students choose not to participate because they feel they are in some way "different" from the rest of the class, are shy, represent a minority view, differ racially from the majority of the class, or believe they do not have a voice in society. Such reactions concern the teachers because discussion is meant to encourage participation and learning, not thwart it. Some students "back out completely" from Cathy's class discussions. "And the worst thing," she says, "is that they feel they are shut down and shut out of the system. They don't count, they don't fit, they don't belong. . .and I really don't think that you're going to get those kids [to discuss]."

Having less proficiency in the English language, according to the teachers, limits what a student is able to share during a discussion. When students with low language competence are in a class with students who are fluent in English, the students with greater fluency dominate the verbal interactions. Frank said he found that language and culture play a powerful role in determining who talks.

> [Students] come from different groups, and culturally it's really difficult to say who's to talk. Some kids aren't as comfortable [talking] as others. Some are uncomfortable [talking] because they don't have a grasp on the language . . . with a lot of kids here English is their second language.

Deborah described two students who did not talk during a discussion. One boy was reticent about talking because his "thoughts come slowly":

> I don't think he's slow in IQ or whatever, but . . . he doesn't process very fast. When you get talking to him one on one, he often has insights. They're just marvelous. But [during discussions], he's terrified because he just knows he would become confused and distressed.

The other boy participates freely and is very verbal when in a special education class. However, "in mainstreamed classes, if you ask him a question he will answer you, but he rarely initiates anything. He's intimidated."

Lesson Objectives

Discussion is considered a time-consuming method of instruction relative to other methods. Teachers are more directing or controlling and are more likely to dominate the interactions with their students when their lesson objectives emphasize "covering" or "getting through" a predetermined amount of information. Alex, for example, when teaching an advanced placement United States history class, reported that he did not use discussion when he had to cover a large amount of information in a short time.

When students already possess information a teacher believes is important or have spent time gathering background information before a classroom discussion, teachers assume a less dominant role. They also loosen control when they do not feel pressured to present a specific amount of information. They are more willing to allow extra time for student interactions because they believe discussions assist student learning. Alex's comment typified the other teachers' comments about this: "You can't rely on the kids to read these days or take very good notes. . . .so they need to be able to interact and play with the information to figure it out."

The teachers' beliefs that students are becoming less willing to read affects the teachers' attitudes about using discussion in the classroom. If a reading assignment provides students with important information for a discussion, then the students who have not read are not prepared to participate. As Bill stated,

> These young men and women could have the finest writing skills, the finest public speaking skills, they could have confidence that would be equated to a mid-management person at Boeing, but without knowledge they have nothing to *talk* about [emphasis his].

The teachers reported frustration about a lack of preparation by students. That led Elaine to go as far as doing "choral readings" with her classes before discussions. "I know that [reading together out loud] sounds 'babyish,' but I do it with them because those who haven't read are at a loss. So, I feel like, let's just do it right then and there." Cathy recalled that she increased the frequency of discussions about "textbook information" as a way for students who have read to share information with those who have not. "Students are reading less and less. If they are going to read less, then they are going to have to discuss more."

Students' knowledge about the topic to be considered influences teachers' lesson objectives and conceptions of discussion. When students know less, teachers

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feel the need to be more active in the discussions, which leads to less interaction among students. Teachers want all their students to know important points about the topic being discussed, but students who know more tend to discuss more. As Alex said, "Certain kids know all the answers and dominate discussions, and the other kids don't learn. You can learn only so much by listening."

Bill said that before most of his discussions, his students needed time to read and research the information they would be discussing. He commented on one particular discussion that he felt was very successful.

> What has really made this dialogue, this discussion, as rich as it was is the painful research that we did. [The students] went in and they may have looked at two hundred articles. . ., and then ultimately brought all of that back into this arena.

The teachers report that absent students pose a great problem for using discussion. Students cannot make up the absence because the class discussion cannot be re-created. Merely copying down the teacher's notes is insufficient if discussion is thought of as a technique that allows students to build their own understanding of an issue through verbal interactions. As Elaine stated, "They gotta be there. I do have kids who come in and say, 'I missed two days, I was sick, what did we do?' And I just don't know where to start."

Age and Maturity of Students

The six teachers do not use discussion in the same way across their several classes. They discriminate, more likely conducting discussion in classes that have what they call more "mature" students, described as some combination of older, more knowledgeable, less-defensive, and more socially adept. Students' maturity is also a consideration when the teachers decide how much control they will exert during a discussion. Less-mature students lead teachers to assume a more controlling position.

Elaine suggested that discussions were difficult with younger students because they "need so much structure." The need to direct students continuously toward the topic being discussed and to emphasize socially acceptable behaviors during discussion made it difficult for Elaine to concentrate on her topic. Similarly, Deborah reported that immature behavior limited her ability to plan a discussion because her students had difficulty interacting with one another.

> I spend so much time at it [correcting inappropriate behavior] that I never feel like we get the time to really interact in any kind of full way. We barely get a thought down and it is gone. There is no time to finish whatever it is. My focus seems to be so much on the relational [social] aspect of dealing with these students that it doesn't seem to get to the subject or the content.

The six teachers emphasized that maturity is related to the type of discussion they select. Whether a discussion is an "exchange of ideas" or a "debate" often is the result of the amount of maturity that the teachers believe their students have. More maturity is needed when the purpose of the verbal interactions is to express different perspectives and increase students' general understanding about a particular topic (exchanging ideas). Less maturity is necessary if the nature of the interactions focus on winning, or on competing against opposing viewpoints (debate).

Bill expressed this idea when he explained that older students often are more mature and thus can "step away from the discussion" and not be solely focused on presenting their personal views. He emphasized that students need skills in discussing, and that those skills require instruction. He suggested that younger students are capable of discussing but need to know "how to participate" in classroom discussions. He contended that those discussions that rely on student input require "quite a bit of practice in learning how to discuss."

Another way in which the maturity of students is a factor pertains to their previous experience with classroom discussion. Students who have rarely shared their ideas verbally with others in a classroom lack understanding about how to do so. As a result, they act defensive, argue, and debate with one another during classroom discussions. Alex suggested that sophomores insist on sticking to their opinion because they lack experience in evaluating information presented to them by a teacher, a textbook, or classmates. Elaine described how previous experience with classroom discussion helps students become more mature discussants.

> They are not used to us [teachers] giving them the ball. So often teachers will present the stuff and not have very many people answer [the teacher's] questions. So then, when we want them to think on their own, they get really nervous.

The teachers faced a dilemma: They hesitate to plan discussions when their students act immaturely, but they believe that immature discussants need to engage in discussions if they are to become more skilled at it.

The teachers do implement rules for classroom discussion when they want more control over immature students, but generally the rules are kept to a minimum, for example, the rule that students should listen and respect their classmates' rights to share their opinions and ideas. They often do not teach a specific list of do's and don't's. They emphasize the intent of rules, rather than the rules themselves. Elaine accomplished this through explicit instruction:

> I spend a lot of time at the beginning of class teaching them about respect and about listening, and that it is

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important to have a voice and also to let others to have a voice, and the whole process of discernment.

Sense of Community in the Classroom

Another factor influencing teachers' use of discussion is the degree to which a sense of community develops in the classroom. A community is characterized by attributes such as trust and respect for one another, feelings of personal safety, common goals for exploring issues and course content together, and appropriate size. When a teacher and students view the class as a community, they are more inclined to interact with one another.

Inherent in the idea of a classroom community is the ability to respect and trust people, something that does not happen without effort by the teacher and willingness by the students. The six teachers make efforts to earn students' trust, and students are held accountable to respect their classmates. Elaine said this was a training process: "I train them from the beginning to become a learning community. There is an atmosphere of trust." Deborah simply described it as a sense that the group "had really good feelings toward each other."

When teachers want their students to share ideas and opinions during a discussion, they are acutely aware of the classroom community. For example, concerns about the effect of student diversity are often alleviated if teachers believe a group of students has developed an atmosphere of respect within the classroom. In other words, students might be very diverse in a number of areas but still engage in fruitful discussions if there is an underlying sense of respect and trust in the classroom.

Because teachers want the classroom to be a safe haven for sharing new ideas and opinions, they are concerned about the degree of personal safety their students feel in the classroom. When students suspect that comments made during a discussion may be mocked or used against them outside of class, they are less likely to share their ideas or opinions.

Another factor affecting classroom community is class size. As the size of a class increases, the sense of community decreases; a class with thirty-five students will not be as close (physically or socially) as one with fifteen students. Because teachers usually have classes with twenty-five to thirty students, discussion is not always the preferred method of instruction. Discussions can occur with as few as two students, but the teachers believe the optimal number of students for a classroom discussion is between five and twenty. That size offers students the chance to hear diverse opinions about the topic but is not so large that they are hesitant to speak because their sense of community is lessened. Bill commented about size,

> I'm not sure you can lead a discussion with thirty-four people; that's one of the problems. I'm not sure you can do it with twenty-five. With fifteen, with ten, I think you can be much more successful.

Interest Level of Students

Students need to be interested in a topic if they are to participate in a discussion on it, and they must believe that discussion is a worthwhile method of instruction. If the teachers determine that their students will not be interested, then discussion is not used. Even if a discussion is planned, the teachers seem willing to abandon it if student interest is low. Frank's comment is typical.

> There are a variety of reasons [for low student interest]. Could be everybody is sleepy. Could be the topic is boring. Could be my prep wasn't good enough. . . . If I see that we are not going anywhere, there is no point in continuing. We will stop and do something else.

Cathy reported that she avoids using discussion when she believes that outside influences will distract students' attention. As she said, "Friday afternoon discussions will likely fail."

If many students are not participating in a discussion, then the teachers fear learning is not occurring, and change to alternative methods of instruction. Elaine recalled that she stopped a discussion about the Missouri Compromise because her students "were not engaged in the discussion." She had them write a one-paragraph description of the account in the textbook instead. "[The planned discussion] was a failure because they weren't interested in doing it." Alex explained that some students dislike classroom discussions because "they are looking for facts instead of asking 'why?'."

Another strategy for overcoming a lack of student interest is to connect the discussion topic to matters that the students are interested in. For example, school policies on smoking, dress codes, or school clubs are often interesting to students and can provide fertile topics for discussion. Unfortunately, however, they usually have little relation to the curriculum. Often a discussion occurs that is interesting to the students but not pertinent to course content.

Closely tied to student interest is that students must believe discussion is a worthwhile method of instruction. Students who do not want to exert the effort needed for discussion, or who believe that teacher-dominated instruction or seat/bookwork is the best way to be taught, pose a formidable challenge to teachers planning to use discussion. Deborah described how her "special ed" students came to class with what she called a

> lazy, uninterested attitude. You would think that here is the opportunity for anything, for discussion, for making sure everyone has their work done because they have similar classes through the day. It should be wonderful. It isn't. They think it is their time to unravel, to play games.

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Frank claimed it was more difficult to use discussion in his advanced placement U.S. history class than in his regular classes because

> the honors kids [advanced placement students] are paranoid about grades and become more nervous about discussion. They're not as open about it because they worry about the reading, and they worry about saying certain things that might be wrong more than the regular track kids.

He also said that his advanced placement students thought discussion was a waste of their class time because they saw it as a "filler" activity. When students do not see value in discussion, they will not be as willing to participate in it, and teachers feel pressure to use more teacher-led methods of instruction.

Advanced placement students thought discussion was a waste of their class time because they saw it as a "filler" activity.

Implications

The results of this study contain a number of implications for the classroom teacher, teacher education, and future educational research. I choose to focus on three implications: students' influence on teachers who plan and use discussion, the teachers as discussion leaders, and suggestions for educating teachers about using classroom discussion.

Student Influences

Students are a powerful influence on teachers' actions. Teachers think about their students' ability and willingness to discuss when they decide if they will use discussion and what type of discussion is most appropriate. Four of the five factors that influence the use of discussion were closely related to students' characteristics (student diversity, age and maturity of students, sense of community in the classroom, and interest level of students). Only one factor (lesson objectives) was directly related to course content. The perceptions teachers have of their students influence them in a number of ways. Methods of instruction that are less dependent on student participation are often chosen when students are judged unable, or unwilling, to discuss. Rather than defending the decision to use classroom discussion, or requiring students to behave appropriately during one, teachers defer to students and move away from discussion.

Metz (1978) noted that lower-achieving classes often received structured written work, with little to no opportunities for verbal interactions, "as a device to quiet a class or to keep it calm" (103). That may sometimes be a wise practice, but it also may be largely illusory, based perhaps on race, ability level, or other prejudices about a particular group of students. The teachers I interviewed reported that they did not use discussion when students neither valued it nor thought the analytical thinking it required was useful to their learning. In addition, teachers said they reduced their use of discussion in poorly behaved classes because managing student behavior problems during the interactions was too difficult.

Teachers

Teachers who use discussion can compare their own thinking about discussion with the influences described in this study. Awareness of the student influence could help teachers determine what factors are inhibiting or enhancing attempts to use discussion in their classrooms. Rather than deciding that discussion cannot be used with a particular group of students, teachers might be able to identify what it is about the group that hinders discussion, and concentrate on overcoming those hindrances. Teachers might also begin to examine the origin of their perceptions about the factors that influence discussion. Perhaps teachers have biases about using discussion in a particular way, in a specific setting, or with a certain group of students.

A second implication for teachers has to do with the awareness that not all students talk during discussion. Although a number of factors may account for limited participation, my findings suggest two: gender and intimidation. Remember that these are the six teachers' beliefs about student participation; other teachers may want to interview their own students to evaluate the reliability of these reasons.

Gender. Teachers concur with research that indicates that girls tend to talk less than boys during class. Those teachers who recognized this trend and tried to promote more gender-equitable discussions reported some success. This indicates that teachers can help overcome gender bias, but it requires explicit talk in class about biases.

Intimidation. Teachers reported that students who were lower in ability, culturally different, or had low proficiency in English often were self-conscious, felt intimidated, and did not verbally participate. Directing discussions with scripts and role playing or providing additional preparatory material to students who feel intimidated might be ways to encourage participation by more students.

Teacher Educators

Teacher educators should model how to lead discussion, thinking out loud with their students about the

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decisions being made during a discussion session. If teachers are to use discussion, practice in leading discussions seems important. Exploring various factors that influence discussion and practicing ways to overcome negative influences could be helpful. Using classroom discussion is difficult for teachers. Instructing preservice and inservice teachers explicitly about discussion could encourage its effective use in the classroom.

The teachers in my sample described ways that gender and student ability influenced discussion. Student differences other than those exist, interactions among students of different races or ethnicities for example, and they also influence discussion. Teachers need to be asked directly if and how classroom discussions are affected when students differ in areas such as race, culture, or socioeconomic levels. Their responses may provide insight into ways teachers might encourage more student participation.

Through classroom discussions, students might learn to interact with others about issues of common interest, an ability that is critical for a democratic system of government that values input from its citizens. Teaching future teachers about using discussion as a method of instruction is an important step in democratic citizenship education.

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