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Promoting Critical Thinking and Civil Discourse via Structured Academic Controversy

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PROMOTING CRITICAL THINKING AND CIVIL DISCOURSE VIA STRUCTURED ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) is a cooperative learning technique also known as Cooperative Controversy or Constructive Controversy. The theory has a nearly 40-year history with David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson being the most prominent scholars in the field publishing hundreds of articles and dozens of books and book chapters. Briefly, the technique involves a form of cooperative debate where groups of four are assigned or select a controversial topic to discuss. The two pairs take turns advocating for each side of the issue before coming together as a group to reach a consensus (or at least respectfully agree to disagree) on the topic.

The author was introduced to SAC in the summer of 2016 as a result of a Higher Learning Commission Quality Initiative Proposal at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point which focuses on ways to infuse the curriculum with activities that foster critical thinking skills and dispositions. Of course a great deal of emphasis was placed on methods of assessment to help make visible student gains in these areas. There is no one all-encompassing definition of critical thinking. For this paper, critical thinking is defined within the context of information literacy and the SAC activity. Critical thinking is the ability to successfully navigate an expansive information landscape including public internet sources and library databases, mine credible and authoritative sources, and evaluate and extract the most compelling evidence from those sources and use that evidence to construct a persuasive argument to both support and oppose a statement or question related to a controversial issue (e.g., Should more gun regulation and laws be enacted to help keep Americans safe?).

The essence of the Quality Initiative Proposal was based on the premise that we all agree critical thinking skills are crucial for the future success of our students. Local businesses were surveyed and indicated overwhelming support. However, according to the proposal “instructors often lack the resources and support they need in order to help their students develop critical thinking skills, and institutions can find it difficult to meaningfully assess critical thinking across the curriculum.” UW-Stevens Point professors Dona Warren and Paula DeHart spearheaded the initiative and organized regular meetings of over 60 faculty (the author included) to discuss critical thinking across the curriculum and how instructors could infuse critical thinking activities and conduct assessment to measure the success of those activities. At an annual campus teaching conference, the author learned about SAC and the learning outcomes associated with it during a presentation given by professors Warren and DeHart entitled “Deliberating for the Common Good.”

After a short presentation outlining the theory, research, and practice of SAC along with an explanation of the activity, the participants were divided into groups of four and presented with a handout detailing 15 arguments in favor of and 15 arguments in opposition of gun control and increased firearm regulation. The handout was printed from the ProCon.org website (<https://gun-control.procon.org/>). As is customary with SAC, each pair used the handout to make an argument for both sides of the issue, present that argument, and then deliberate as a group of four to come to a consensus or reasons why a consensus could not be reached.

At the end of the group work, questions and comments were solicited. A faculty member in the audience brought up the issue of authority and credibility of information sources and how critical quality sources are for providing a knowledge foundation and “mental scaffolding” to extend background knowledge and help craft a persuasive argument. This comment inspired me to think

about how I might extend on the SAC activity in a one-credit information literacy class to include source discovery and evaluation (make students find supporting and opposing information and construct annotated bibliographies) and hopefully inspire an appreciation for the fact that controversial topics are not one-sided, even though we often feel strongly in favor of one side. All too often in my experiences providing library instruction, faculty assign a research paper where students pick a topic (one that has multiple perspectives), find sources, read the sources and then either write a paper or create an annotated bibliography. Many students gravitate towards topics that they have a firm opinion on and are reluctant (and not required in most cases) to spend time seeking out and evaluating perspectives and reasoning that runs counter to their own. As a result, they never have to wrestle with cognitive conflict, something that many studies have concluded is essential in helping students overcome confirmation bias.

LIBRARY INSTRUCTION, CRITICAL THINKING, AND CONTROVERSY IN THE CLASSROOM

Library instruction has been seen by some as “an appropriate teaching strategy to encourage and reinforce the development of critical thinking in the college curriculum” (Bodi, 1998, p. 150). Steven Herro in an article entitled “Bibliographic instruction and critical thinking” writes that “when librarians function as instructors, they must help foster critical thinking and information literacy” (2000, p. 554). Eugene Engeldinger focuses specifically on the annotated bibliography assignment as a vehicle for helping students across the curriculum think critically.

With this in mind, I hoped to be able to show over the course of a four week period within a 15 week one-credit information literacy course that SAC increases interest in a topic, motivates students to learn more about the topic, and results in an increased mastery of information sources (mostly articles from popular and scholarly publications) when compared to a traditional annotated bibliography assignment without SAC. I wondered how SAC, a form of cooperative learning might enrich an in-class annotated bibliography assignment that I had done in the past where students conducted research independently and only shared perspectives and sources with one another at the end via a short presentation.

Although it has a 40-year history in the literature and has been applied across the disciplines to help students deliberate controversial discipline-specific issues in a productive way, very little had been written about if and how SAC inspires students to search, evaluate, and integrate sources differently than traditional assignments like independently created research papers and annotated bibliographies. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1997) in their book *Academic Controversy: Enriching College Instruction Through Intellectual Conflict* briefly summarize a handful of studies that have been done on controversy and information seeking behaviors. It is noted that individuals involved in a controversy, compared to persons involved in concurrence seeking, read more relevant material and more frequently gather further information during their free time. They also more frequently request information from others. Controversy, compared with both concurrence seeking and individualistic learning, promotes greater use of relevant materials and more frequently giving up free time to gather further information. (Johnson & Johnson, 2009, pp. 32-33).

The word “controversy” is often associated with negative connotations and is considered by some teachers as an unwanted element in the classroom. Within controversy and conflict (characteristics of a debate) there are elements of disagreement, argumentation, and rebuttal that could result in individuals disliking each other and could create difficulties in establishing good relationships. They seem, however, to have the opposite effect. Constructive controversy has been found to promote greater liking among participants than did concurrence seeking, debate, or individualistic efforts (Johnson & Johnson, 2009, p. 47).” Smith, Johnson, and Johnson (1981) share the results from a study that “support the hypothesis that active controversy within learning groups promotes higher mastery and retention of the material being studied than either concurrence seeking within learning groups or individualistic study” (p. 660).

SAC CLASSROOM INTRODUCTION, EXPERIMENT CONDITIONS, AND DATA GATHERING

In Spring 2018, I taught three sections of a one-credit Library Resources 102 for students in the University Honors Program. The content mirrors our traditional Library Resources 101 with the academic exception that students must have earned a 26 or better on the ACT to be eligible for the program. We spent one class period doing the SAC activity as I had experienced during the session by professors Warren and Dehart. Each group debated one side of the issue of gun control and increased regulation from the ProCon.org website before switching and advocating for the other side. The activity culminated with them coming back into groups of four to discuss the evidence for both sides.

Another focus on the Quality Initiative was to create opportunities for students to practice argument mapping as a way to acquire critical thinking skills and dispositions. Argument mapping is a way to visually show the logical structure of arguments. You break up an argument (or in this case a statement in support of or in opposition of a controversial topic) into its constituent claims, and use lines, boxes, colors, and location to indicate the relationships between the various parts. The resulting map allows us to see exactly how each part of an argument is related to every other part. By infusing argument mapping into the SAC students had a visual representation of multiple perspectives on a controversial issue and arguments for and against them. Even if a student does not agree with a perspective on the map, they can’t simply dismiss it (See Appendix A). Also included is an activity sheet that gives

definitions of key terms, states the discussion question, and provides space to document reasons to support the discussion and reasons to oppose (See Appendix B). After this “soft rollout” I was ready to embed an extending SAC activity that would require students to not only debate both sides of an issue, but also find evidence to support their claims.

Control Group

The annotated bibliography assignment for one section of LR 101 in the fall of 2018 (21 students), had students work with an assigned controversial topic from the ProCon.org website and use that topic as the basis for finding five sources to support an argument for either side of the issue. Students had instruction and experience distinguishing between different types of sources (e.g., peer-reviewed articles versus popular magazine articles versus newspapers, etc.) before the annotated bibliography was assigned. The assignment spanned three class periods and can be considered the control group. It was an approach that I had used in past sections.

1st Class – Students are assigned a controversial issue and begin searching for sources.

2nd class – Students continued searching for sources to compile a five-item annotated bibliography supporting one side of the issue.

3rd class – Students present for 5-8 minutes on their topic highlighting their sources.

Experimental Group

The assignment for one section of LR 101 in the spring of 2019 (11 students), and one section of LR 102 (19 students) spanned four class periods instead of three. The four-class activity unfolded as follows:

1st Class – Students are broken up into groups of four and assigned a controversial issue before engaging in the Structured Academic Controversy.

2nd and 3rd class – Students work in groups to compile a 20-item annotated bibliography that strives for balance by including roughly the same number of articles that support and oppose a controversial issue statement.

4th class – Students present both sides of the controversial issue using discovered sources and talk about the SAC experience. Complete the same short survey as students in the fall.

After the presentations were finished students were given time in class to complete the same anonymous survey as the students in the control group completed in the fall of 2018.

SAC ACTIVITY SURVEY AND ASSESSMENT

The first survey question asks if students spent time outside of class finding or annotating sources. It was made clear to all three groups that outside work on the project was not required but also not forbidden. Having students do the searching in class allows me to answer questions as they occur and also to observe the process by which students go about selecting or dismissing sources. Twenty-four percent of the 21 students in the LR 101 class without the SAC activity reported spending time outside of class finding or annotating their sources. Fifty percent of the 12 students in the LR 101 class with the SAC and 57 percent of the 20 students in the LR 102 also with SAC reported spending time outside of class.

The second question asked if students discussed their topic with others outside of class. Twenty-nine percent of the students in LR 101 without SAC reported discussing their topic outside of class while 42 percent of the LR 101 with SAC and 55 percent of the students in LR 102 with SAC reported doing so.

The third and final question had students report about how many articles they consulted before selecting their final five. The results indicated that students with the SAC activity evaluated more sources in general. Twenty-nine percent of the students that completed the traditional annotated bibliography considered 15 to 20 articles (middle of the scale) before settling on five compared to 58 percent for the LR 101 group with SAC and 40 percent for the LR 102 group with SAC.

Granted, this is a very small sample size, but it seems to validate SAC research studies that correlate participating in the cooperative activity with student motivation and interest in learning more. In this case spending more time outside of class researching, talking about their topic with others, and considering more potential sources. Also, annotations written by the LR 101 group without the SAC activity contain more of the language from the articles abstracts or summaries than do the annotations of both of the groups that had the SAC activity. This may indicate that students read more of the article because they were motivated

by the SAC activity and it inspired them to dig deeper into their sources as they explored the different arguments for and against. The end result being more original language when describing the source.

CONCLUSION

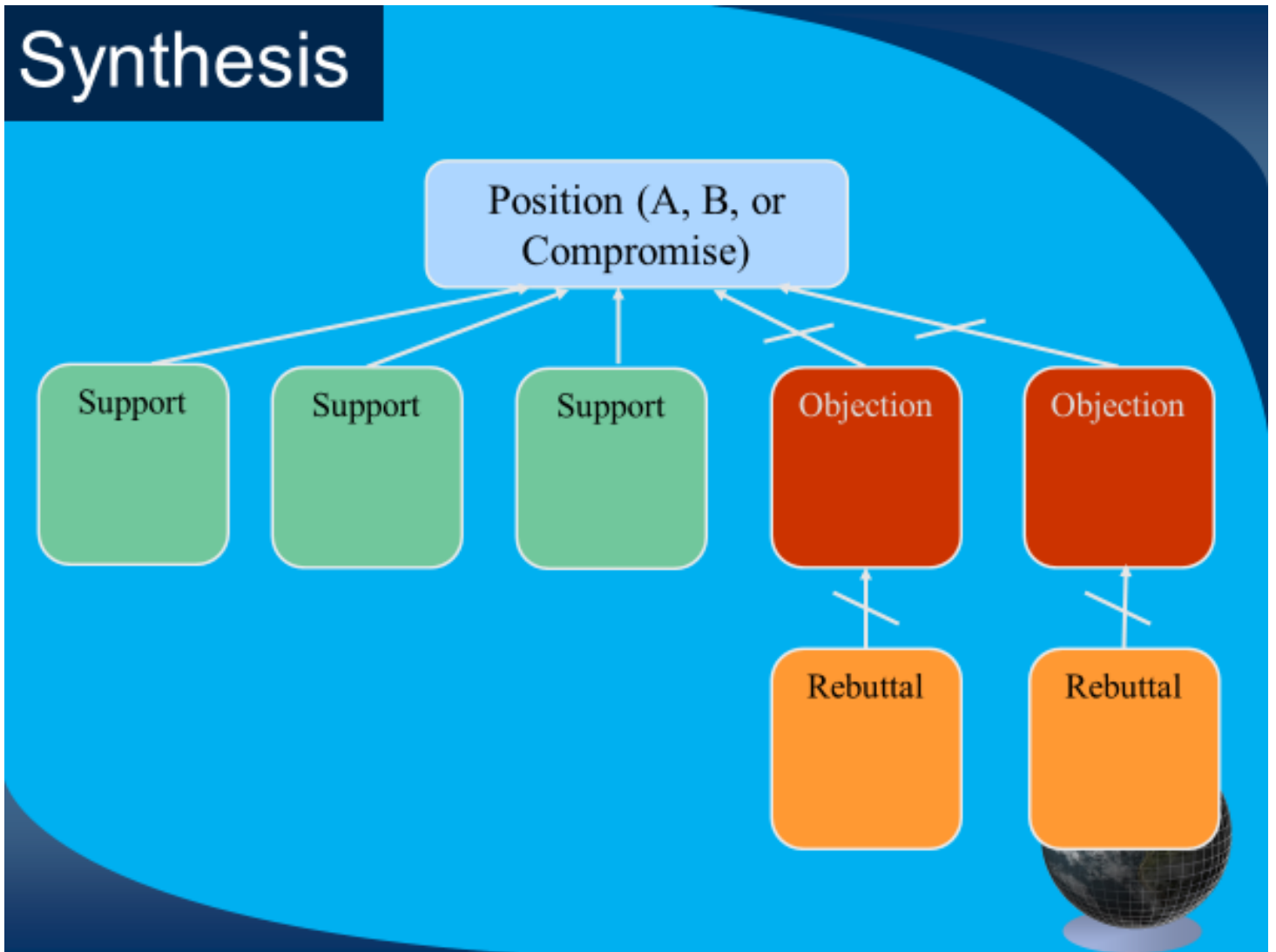
For students to be “good” citizens, they need to learn how to engage in collective decision-making about community and societal issues. Johnson and Johnson (2009) refer to such collective decision making as political discourse. When students participate in a controversy, they are also learning the procedures necessary to be citizens in a democracy. “The combination of cooperative learning and constructive controversy has been used to teach students in such countries as Azerbaijan, the Czech Republic, Armenia, and Lithuania how to be citizens in a democracy” (p. 48). This idea certainly aligns with the goal of many libraries of all kinds to support and promote social justice and informed decision making and create spaces that encourage and support civil discourse.

While one of our goals as librarians will always be helping students locate resources, it is important that we look for opportunities to collaborate with faculty and instructors to design experiences that also challenge students to use those resources to not just validate their present opinion, but to challenge that opinion. It is important that we look for opportunities like the Quality Initiative at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point to join the larger conversation on our campuses of how we can prepare students to go out into the world and successfully use information resources to foster civil discourse and creative problem-solving.

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APPENDIX A – ARGUMENT MAP FOR SAC GROUP WORK



LOEX

APPENDIX B – ACTIVITY WORKSHEET (FORMATTED TO FIT ON ONE PAGE)
STRUCTURED ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY ACTIVITY

Definition of Key Terms

Discussion - a kind of shared inquiry, the desired outcomes of which rely on the expression and consideration of diverse views. The purpose of discussion is to create “shared understanding” through listening, questioning and working through ideas “in progress” (Parker, 2003).

Debate – a structured discussion of opposing viewpoints where students research and learn about their side of an issue in order to “win” the debate based on their reasoning (Larson & Keiper, 2011).

Structured Academic Controversy - a carefully constructed and deliberative discussion process that promotes civil discourse and critical thinking (Parker, 2003).

Key Dispositions for Participating in a Structured Academic Controversy:

Truth-Seeking, Healthy Skepticism, Tracking Reasoning, Attentive Listening, Open-Mindedness, Case-Making

Review the Shared Reading

Identify the most compelling/interesting facts and ideas presented and list below.

Structured Academic Controversy Discussion Question:

Should more gun regulation and laws be enacted to help keep Americans safe?

Reasoning Process

Reasons to Support the Discussion Question (Pair 1, Viewpoint A)	Reasons to Oppose the Discussion Question (Pair 2, Viewpoint B)
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Reasons to Oppose the Discussion Question (Pair 1, Viewpoint B)	Reasons to Support the Discussion Question (Pair 2, Viewpoint A)
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Synthesis of Reasoning

Identify the most compelling arguments for each side.

Viewpoint A:	Viewpoint B:
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List and explain your synthesized group viewpoint (Viewpoint A, Viewpoint B, or Compromise Viewpoint).

What is something you learned about this topic that you didn't know before the discussion?

How might collaborative discussion with people of different viewpoints contribute to informed decision-making and action?