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What we learned from Covid-19 about discourse-based learning

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ABSTRACT

Now is an auspicious time to make student-centered discourse a centerpiece of social and civic education, as well as across the curriculum more broadly. We describe here the features of the middle-school program we have developed and implemented for this purpose, emphasizing its concentration on direct student-to-student communication, in contrast to the more common whole-class teacher-led discussion. The Covid-19 epidemic forced us to modify the way in which we implemented the program, eliminating face-to-face contact. What had been an in-person interactive discourse-based workshop we transformed into a remotely-experienced, technology-supported interaction between rotating student pairs. Each participant debated individually with a sequence of individual peers who held an opposing view on a series of social issues. This modified distance-learning approach revealed some unanticipated benefits that we share here. Most notable among them were the enhanced comfort in sharing their views that participants reported they experienced, due to the remote, text-only connection that concealed their personal identities.

1. Introduction

Social Studies educators (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Parker, 2006, 2021), have now widely embraced the view that discourse-based learning has a key role to play in classroom practice, with appropriate topics encompassing both the historical and contemporary. Even the most controversial contemporary topics, Hess and McAvoy (2014) claim, are suitable for discussion as long as a rich set of reasons exist to support opposing positions and teachers have the experience and confidence to engage students in such discussions with the needed sensitivity. The recent publication of the report Civic Reasoning & Discourse (Lee, White, & Dong, 2021) commissioned by the National Academy of Education is a milestone in providing educators guidance in these respects, as well as underscoring the pedagogical value of their doing so. This is so in particular in relation to citizenship education. An essential step in preparing young people for civic action is to engage them in deep thinking and talking about the issues they might take action with regard to.

We believe the particular discourse-based approach we describe in this article is well matched to the objectives and content of social studies education (Kuhn & Halpern, 2022); yet, the approach is by no means confined to social studies subject matter. Indeed, discourse-based education has come into favor as desirable pedagogy across the curriculum (Clarke, Resnick, & Rosé, 2015. Mehan & Cazden, 2015; Resnick, Asterhan, Clarke, & Schantz, 2018). The discourse-centered approach described in this article has several unique features we identify. It also has the benefit of a substantial body of empirical research documenting its effectiveness. Recent empirical research in classrooms shows its wide applicability and success across diverse science, history, and social subject matter (Iordanou & Constantinou, 2015; Iordanou & Rapanta, 2021; Kuhn, Feliciano, & Kostikina, 2019; Matos, 2021; Rapanta, 2021;...
In some cases, the approach has been integrated into existing curricula and in others it has been introduced as an independent course or activity.

A central feature of our approach is that students conduct dialogs directly with one another, either individually or as a pair, rather than in whole-class discussion mediated by the teacher, the most common format of discourse-based instruction. Another is that students engage deeply with the subject they are discussing, over multiple occasions. These sessions have been conducted most often in twice weekly class periods over a term, but a dense week-long all-day workshop model has also proven successful (see Hemberger, Kuhn, Matos, & Shi, 2017; Iordanou, Kuhn, Matos, Shi, & Hemberger, 2019). A third is their taking place in writing, providing a record that promotes reflection. The method is described in summary form by Iordanou and Rapanta (2021) and in full detail in the volume by Kuhn (2018) with separate editions for students and teachers. Rapanta and Felton (2022) provide a thorough review in identifying how different instructional approaches that identify themselves as discourse-based, including ours, differ from one another.

![Reflection Sheet](image_url)

**Fig. 1.** Other and own reflection sheets.
2. De-centering discourse from teacher-students to student-student

Why might discourse be valued as a desirable pedagogy? One reason is its status as a so-called “21st century skill.” In their adult lives, both personal and professional, people are called on to address problems and decisions collaboratively. Second, high-quality talk develops and reinforces high-quality thinking. At their best high-quality discourse and high-quality thinking become one (Gergen, 2015; Kuhn, 2019; Rapanta, 2019). Serious discussion is intellectually demanding. Especially discussions of what might be, which require constructing and comparing possibilities.

Leading such discussions is similarly challenging. A recent review (Rapanta & Felton, 2022) of different approaches to discourse-based pedagogy confirms that the large majority of these are based on whole-class discussion. While this format remains the most frequent format for classroom discourse, teachers commonly report feelings of inadequacy in managing these discussions (Clarke et al., 2015; Resnick et al., 2018), threatening their widespread adoption. In the approach we describe here, some whole-class discussion
occurs but it is the exception rather than the rule and the majority of time is spent in what we refer to as student-centered discourse. All discourse involving students should ideally of course be student-centered, but we use the term here to refer to the situation in which a student converses directly with another student, without the teacher or other adult playing an intermediary through which such talk occurs.

The defining characteristic, and the objective, of student-centered discourse, as we use the term, is “decentering” the teacher as the channel through which all discourse flows. Ideally, the teacher relinquishes a role of authority as the source of knowledge and replaces it with shared construction of meaning and another basis for authority – that of evidence and argument (Kuhn, 2019; Rapanta, 2019). The student-centered approach that my collaborators and I have developed reduces the demands teachers experience in a way that also benefits students. Students communicate directly with a succession of peers – one to one or pair to pair, in rotating fashion. The teacher plays an overseeing and, as needed, advisory role. The teacher’s role includes making available, in brief Q&A doses, factual information related to the topic, suggesting these may help them in making their arguments. Soon students begin to pose their own questions and are assisted as needed in securing answers. The value of this gradual integration of knowledge into argument is that students will better appreciate and be able to make use of this information if they first recognize its potential argumentive purpose (Iordanou et al., 2019).

In short, the knowledge becomes situated in a framework of the arguments it has the potential to serve. Through sustained engagement and practice, students gain an increasing sense of responsibility to one another and they come to embrace and uphold norms of discourse – beginning with close listening and direct responding – that this responsibility entails (Kuhn & Zillmer, 2015). Claims are expected to have reasons and these must stand to the challenge of strong argument and evidence that may weaken them. In time, students come to feel the empowerment of entering into and being accepted as members of a community of discourse. Equally important, students are “on duty” 100% of the time. They cannot relax into the passive listener role that a majority of students occupy a majority of the time in whole-class discussion.

Students choose the side to take on an issue (although they may later change their position) and begin with each team of same-side peers working in small groups to construct their position and bring evidence to bear on it, and to prepare for what is the core experience – a series of dialogs with rotating opposing-side peers. These dialogs are conducted as written exchanges, typically (but not necessarily) electronic, between a same-side pair and successive pairs of opposing-side peers. The written format provides a record that externalizes thought into tangible, retrievable form (in contrast to verbal discourse, which disappears as soon as it is uttered) and supports reflection on what has been said. The written record of the dialog thus becomes the object of various reflective activities students engage in (see Figs. 1-3).

Dialogic argument serves as a bridge to individual argumentative writing (Shi, Matos, & Kuhn, 2019; Kuhn, Hemberger, & Khait, 2016; Kuhn, Halpern, & Bruun, in press). The continuing experience of dialog with a succession of peers holding an opposing position makes the opposing position and its accompanying arguments clear and vivid enough so that the writer can summon them and address them, and, moreover, sees the relevance of doing so. A feature of our approach is that the major mode of student-to-student communication is written, typically electronic. The electronic mode enables a student pair to review the accumulating exchanges that appear on the screen before them and plan their next moves, promoting deeper discussion and reflection, essentially doubling the amount of discourse (verbal or written) that occurs. A familiar activity—everyday talk—develops into a more formal, symbolic, intrapersonal one. Dialog contributes to the development of written argument by giving the latter a purpose. There is now someone to communicate to—the “missing interlocutor” (Graff, 2003)—and a purpose for communicating.

Fig. 3. Schematic summary of activities.
Illustrations from Friday video feedback sessions during online workshop.

Note: Students are presented video group-level feedback after having debated the topic with different opposing-view peers in nine daily sessions. Excerpts from student dialogs are in quotes and coach's feedback in bold. Topics: Should animals be used to test medical procedures, drugs, or other products? Should teens who commit serious crimes be tried in regular adult court or a special court for juveniles? Should all schools have the same school curriculum or should this be left up to local communities? When you finish high school, is it better to go right to college or work for a few years first? Should high school graduates be required to do community service? Should everyone be allowed to vote or should voters be required to show they have studied the candidates and issues?

1. Be sure to explain your thinking, so your partner has something to react to. One person, for example, when a partner asked them for their reasons, just said, “Same as yours.” Neither person gains much from this response. Explaining your thinking includes defining your terms carefully.

   a. One student said: “I agree with your statement” and the other student replied, “Well, I have nothing more to say” This doesn’t move the dialog forward for either participant.

   b. [animal topic] “What do you mean by an animal being tortured?” Partner responds, “Being put in insanely small cages, fattened up extremely quickly…”

   c. [juvenile justice topic] One student asked: “Shouldn’t the person who robs the bank be given a longer sentence than the guy in the getaway vehicle?” and their partner responded: “No I think they should get the same sentence because they each had a hand in the crime. While the driver did a less serious thing, they essentially let the robber get away with it.” The response is specific and explains the opposing view clearly.

   d. [juvenile justice topic] A student asked: “How do we know harsh punishment is better?” and their partner replied: “It’s not a punishment, it’s an experience. Harsh experiences are better because if it is not harsh, then the kid would be like ‘oh it’s not so bad, I can do it again’ but a harsh punishment would really stick in the kid’s memory.”

2. React to what the other person has said. The worst option is to ignore, by saying for example, “Well that’s your opinion. Here’s my opinion.” What your partner has put out there deserves a response. You might say, “I totally agree”, or “I agree” or “I partially agree BUT”, or “I disagree and here’s why”. You could even say what one debater said, “I didn’t think about that. That’s a good reason” (They could have added WHY they think it’s a good reason).

   a. [juvenile justice topic] One student said: “I think because of what they did, they should be tried in a serious manner” and their partner asked for specifics: “Can you explain what you mean by serious manner?”

   b. [national curriculum] One student asked their partner, “What about having local curriculums is making you unsure?” and the partner responded “I don’t know” What one partner has put out there deserves a response.

   c. [animal topic] One person said, “One reason is that it’s better to test on animals before people [in order] to know they are safe.” The other responded, “But testing is cruel to the animals.” This could be true and is an important issue. But where does this response leave the first person’s reason? Safety to humans is an important issue and the second person needs to respond to it and not simply introduce their own reason.

3. Compliment your partner on a good idea, but also tell them why you think it’s good.

   a. “I liked your reasoning because you came up with a strong reason that was very convincing.” This is a good start but would benefit from an example of the “strong reason” mentioned.

   b. [juvenile justice topic] One student said: “Juvenile court is more expensive for the government” and their partner kindly responded by saying: “That is interesting about how juvenile court is more expensive, I had no idea. That’s a good point as well.”

4. Get your partner to explain their thinking if they haven’t said enough for you to understand it.

   a. [juvenile justice topic] One partner said, “I think it depends on the age of the teen and the crime.” The strongest response would be, “Can you explain why those factors are important?” Instead, the partner responds by introducing their own ideas: “Well, one of my reasons is …” and ignoring what their partner has said.

   b. [college v work topic] “Are you saying they’re wasting money because they haven’t explored their interests?”

   c. [national/ community service] One partner said: “I think that once people realize the many benefits coming from community/international service, they will not refuse” and their partner asked them to clarify: “What are some of the benefits?” This allowed their partner to explain their thinking and share evidence by responding: “college credits, learning self-confidence and responsibility, and feeling satisfied and happier when giving to poor communities.”

   d. [juvenile justice topic] One student said: “[Adult courts] are better because they get more punishments” and their partner responded “Why is it good to get a harsher punishment? What good does punishment do for them?”

5. Be careful not to drift away from the topic entirely, even if your point is a good one.

   a. [juvenile justice topic] FOne person said, “I also think they should have some sort of help when they come out of jail.” This is a good point, but it does not address the question of whether the teen vs. adult system is better.

   b. [animal topic], One person said, “I actually have a friend who works with mice.” An interesting anecdote but it does not address the question of whether animals should be used as test subjects.

   c. [voting topic] For example one partner said, “I think that they should pass a competency test. What do you think?” and the other partner responded: “I agree”. Neither partner offers or asks for reasons why, and that makes it tough to continue the debate and move into increasingly meaningful dialog. Still, the first partner asking “What do you think?” is a good start to probe their partner’s thinking. They could follow up with “Why do you think that?”

6. Make sure what you or your partner say really addresses the question. If your partner’s point doesn’t answer the question, tell them and bring them back to the main question.

   a. [national curriculum] One student stated, “Lots of things you learn in school are boring, but if they are talking about something that you are interested in, you pay attention.” Their partner attempts to address the disconnect between the statement and the topic by responding, “Yes, but not liking the topic and having the same curriculum are unrelated.”

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Table 1 (continued)

b. [juvenile justice topic] For example, one debater said, “I think that teens can change and it's harder for adults to change.” And the partner responded, “So why does that mean teen court is better?” The partner likely has a reason for introducing this opinion but should make them explain the reason. It’s okay to say, “What point are you trying to make?” It’s better to ask them to repeat if you’re not sure, so then the discussion can go forward.

c. [voting topic] One debater said, “Here’s a better solution- just fund schools better so everyone has a good education and understands how the government works. Then we can make an informed decision without having to deny people the right to vote.” We do not know that better school funding would produce informed voters. While it is an interesting statement, the question being debated is not school funding.

d. [college v work topic] One debater said, “My main reason is that a college degree is a required step in many job opportunities.” The question being debated is not whether to go to college, but WHEN to go to college.

7. Consider why your partner is telling you this. Why do they think it's important? What are they trying to show? If you’re not sure, ask.

a. [juvenile justice topic] One debater said, “In teen court they get special treatment but in adult court they don’t.” The partner could have just asked, “Why is that important?” but they do something even better by responding “We should find out if this special treatment really does them any good.” That will get to the point of whether special treatment is an important factor.

b. [voting topic] One debater said, “The president can get us into wars”. The debater may have a reason to present that piece of information and the partner can respond with “Why is that important?” in order to get to the heart of whether or not that piece of information is relevant.

c. [juvenile justice topic] A student said: “Teens can commit the same crimes as an adult could” and their partner replied: “Yeah. That's a good point. But why does it matter?”

8. Always consider whether it's certain the other's claim is correct. What's the evidence to support this claim?

a. [juvenile justice topic] For example, one person said, “Usually people that commit crimes are poor, so even if you help them, they will go back out and do it again because they need to.” You need to question their starting assumption – “people who commit crimes are poor.” If the starting assumption isn’t necessarily true, nothing can follow from it.

b. [national curriculum] A student said: “Most of the adults right now have jobs that don’t interest them at all. If they were given the chance to study different things…they would be happy with their jobs.”

The partner can add to their understanding by asking in response, “What evidence do you have that most adults have jobs that don’t make them happy?”

c. [voting topic] One person said, “Voting is a human right and taking that away from someone who is eligible is technically illegal.” You need to question their starting assumption – “voting is a human right.” If the starting assumption isn’t necessarily true, nothing can follow from it.

d. [national/ community service] One student mentioned that kids might ‘risk their lives’ if they engaged in mandatory service after high school and their partner responded: “Do you have evidence that they risk their lives for community service?”

9. If you have doubts, ask your partner “How do WE KNOW that’s true?” Don’t say, “How do YOU know that’s true?” making it sound like a challenge. We KNOW together. If one of us can show for sure it’s false (or true), then we both know. So, together, find the facts you need.

a. [college v work topic] One debater said, “After high school most people have a plan; if they don’t go to college it might make it harder to achieve.” You need to question their starting assumption – “most have a plan.” Is that accurate?

b. [juvenile justice topic] A student said: “Just because teens get harsher punishments, doesn’t mean they’ll behave better.” Their partner responded, “Can you provide evidence?”

c. [juvenile justice topic] A students said, “If they go to prison with the adults, they are more likely to be attacked” and their partner asked: “Do you have any proof of this?”

10. Know and point it out if you don’t have the evidence you need. Figure out where to get it.

a. [animal topic] “I think we’d need some additional info to show that the testing does benefit humans.”

b. [animal topic] “I thought they were careful to avoid or minimize an animal's suffering, so we should find that out.”

11. Question the assumptions underlying the issue.

a. [juvenile justice topic] One debater asked, “Why do teens need different treatment than adults?” The partner was able to respond with a reason: “Their minds are quite underdeveloped.”

b. [juvenile justice topic] One person said, “It sounds like you are suggesting it’s better to give teens a smaller punishment. Why?” The partner disagreed and redefined what they are debating: “It should not be a question of punishment; rather, their future threat to society.” So, is the goal to punish the wrong-doer or keep others safe? Debaters need to get these silent assumptions out in the open and settled if they’re going to make progress in deciding the best course of action- which will depend on the purpose.

c. [voting topic] One debater said, “What if they [the voters] are mentally ill and doing bad stuff for our country on purpose?” The partner responded, “Something that might be bad to you might not be bad to them.”

12. Explore your partner's reasoning, especially when you think you don't agree with it.

a. [college v work topic] Your partner says, “Going to college directly can put a load of stress on a young person” You disagree and want to counter this argument, but if you just say ‘that’s not true’ you haven't weakened their reason by saying what’s wrong with it and you haven't moved the discussion forward. You need to do that, but first try to better understand your partner's thinking, by asking for example, “Why do you think it will put a load of stress on them?”

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Summary and examples of coding scheme categories.

| Category           | Description                                                                 | Examples                                                                 |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Probing Question   | An utterance that requests a response from the dialogic partner (Q)         | “Could you elaborate?”                                                  |
| Meta-talk          | An idea regarding the dialog itself (M)                                     | “What are your reasons?”                                                |
|                    |                                                                            | “What does that have to do with our topic?”                              |
|                    |                                                                            | “I understand that is your opinion but this is a debate, and we are supposed to argue against the other person’s opinion.” |
| Substantiating     | A factual statement intended to strengthen or weaken a claim (E)            | “We never know because we don’t have statistics.”                       |
|                    |                                                                            | “There is room for another 10 million people.” (in response to, “There’s not enough room in the US for everyone who wants to come here.”) |
| Countering         | A form of counterargument that rejects the opponent’s argument without providing a justification for doing so (Counter-D) | “I don’t agree with you.”                                               |
| Counter-disagree   | A form of counterargument that contradicts the opponent’s argument by introducing an alternative argument (Counter-A) | “They benefit from being here so it’s helpful for them to be here to do work and things like that.” (in response to, “There’s not enough room in the US for everyone who wants to come here.”) |
| Counter-alternative|                                                                            | “The USA is a pretty large country and there is a lot of space for a lot of people” (in response to, “There’s not enough room in the US for everyone who wants to come here.”) |
| Counter-critique   | A form of counterargument that critiques the opponent’s preceding claim as incorrect (Counter-C) | “It won’t discourage others because their needs are too great.” (in response to, “Sending them back will discourage others from coming.”) |
| Counter-undermine  | A form of counterargument that undermines the opponent’s reasoning (Counter-U) | “They came here for a better life, so they wouldn’t be better off back home” (in response to, “They’d be better off back in their own home country.”) |
|                    |                                                                            | “For some people maybe…” (in response to, “They’d be better off back in their own home country.”) |
| Concession         | Acknowledgement that the opponent’s claim has some merit or one’s own claim some weakness (Cn) | “It sounds mean (to send them back) but we need to keep everyone safe” (in response to Stay argument). |

Examples come from the final dialog assessment in which participants addressed the topic “Should young people brought illegally to the US as children be allowed to stay or sent back?”
4. What does the approach achieve?

Discourse skill development assessed at the individual level at the conclusion of the program equaled that of previous groups who participated in person (Hemberger et al., 2017; Kuhn et al., 2019), suggesting its value beyond that of necessary adaptation to external circumstances. In either case, gains must be carefully assessed. Our approach has from the start held lofty goals, but at the same time it has held firmly to evidence-based standards and values. An overview of the research base supporting the work that we have described is available in a chapter of Building our best future (Kuhn, 2018) and a chapter by Iordanou and Rapanta (2021), each with a full list of references to standard research reports in the relevant education and psychology journals. Together, these reports detail gains over time in discourse skills (see Table 2, which illustrates the coding scheme). In earlier work, these discourse gains have been shown to extend to individual written argumentative essays (Kuhn et al., 2016). This work has proven to be a rich source of insights into mechanisms of development in learning to argue well and in particular the interplay between dialogic and individual argument skills as they develop in linked ways (Halpern & Kuhn, 2022; Kuhn, 2019; Papathomas & Kuhn, 2017).

A most recent report (Halpern & Kuhn, 2022) details the outcomes of the online program adapted for pandemic circumstances. Discourse skill gains were analyzed according to the scheme displayed in Table 2. Over a four-week period of daily electronic discourse, participants gained in number of idea units contained in their expressions, as well as the nature of these ideas. All of the categories identified and illustrated in Table 2 showed gains over time, in the number of participants displaying them and in the frequency with which they did so. Nonetheless, almost half of participants never showed use of some categories, notably question and meta-talk. In addition, the weaker counterargument types, Counter-Disagree and Counter-Alternative, did not show significant decline over time. We have sought to define and employ solid, replicable metrics to assess key constructs and their trajectories of growth. At the same time we have embraced the broadest developmental objectives of supporting the growth of individual minds to their fullest capacities and the collective engagement of these minds in the workings of a robust deliberative democracy. A recurring theme in the NAE Civic Reasoning & Discourse report is the need for educators not only to engage students in sustained discussion with peers as a central path in their developing the skills and dispositions that will enable them to become contributing citizens in a democratic society. The further and related theme is the need to do so in ways that are cognizant and respectful of students' diverse identities and sensitivities. In this regard, we see the discovery we stumbled onto as a significant, far-reaching one. There is a risk that emphasis on the need for teachers to take into account and be responsive to students' identities and sensitivities may further inhibit their undertaking discourse-based teaching and learning at all. Whatever the varied whole-class, small-group and student-to-student approaches teachers choose to explore, our experience suggests it is possible for them to be cognizant and sensitive to students' individual identities, and what personal aspects of themselves students wish to share, while embracing their common humanity. There is room for both, and there is no reason they cannot occupy a shared space.

5. Conclusion

We have sought to define and employ solid, replicable metrics to assess key constructs and their trajectories of growth. At the same time we have embraced the broadest developmental objectives of supporting the growth of individual minds to their fullest capacities and the collective engagement of these minds in the workings of a robust deliberative democracy. A recurring theme in the NAE Civic Reasoning & Discourse report is the need for educators not only to engage students in sustained discussion with peers as a central path in their developing the skills and dispositions that will enable them to become contributing citizens in a democratic society. The further and related theme is the need to do so in ways that are cognizant and respectful of students' diverse identities and sensitivities. In this regard, we see the discovery we stumbled onto as a significant, far-reaching one. There is a risk that emphasis on the need for teachers to take into account and be responsive to students' identities and sensitivities may further inhibit their undertaking discourse-based teaching and learning at all. Whatever the varied whole-class, small-group and student-to-student approaches teachers choose to explore, our experience suggests it is possible for them to be cognizant and sensitive to students' individual identities, and what personal aspects of themselves students wish to share, while embracing their common humanity. There is room for both, and there is no reason they cannot occupy a shared space.

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