

# Classroom Discussion and Threaded Electronic Discussion: Learning In Two Arenas

BRUCE E. LARSON AND TIMOTHY A. KEIPER  
*Western Washington University*

Classroom discussion is an important teaching strategy because of its relation to the development of participatory citizenship, critical thinking, and classroom community (Engel & Ochoa, 1988; Parker, 1996; Weikel, 1994). Discussion is particularly relevant in social studies education because of the mandate to prepare students for participatory democracy. Several studies (Weikel & Mangram, 1995; Larson, 2000; Larson & Parker, 1996) have examined the distinctive nature of discussion itself. Those studies indicate that there are various types of discussion that vary in purpose, content, and format. In this article the author begins a look at two general “types” of discussion in schools: *classroom discussion*<sup>3/4</sup>where face-to-face verbal interactions occur among students and teacher<sup>3/4</sup>and *threaded electronic discussion*<sup>3/4</sup>where the interactions occur electronically and asynchronously by way of a computer.

Interest in this topic stems from the possibility that threaded discussions may be a promising format for discussing public issues in the classroom. Merry Merryfield (2000) provided several advantages that threaded discussions have over other electronic discussion formats (e.g., list serves, chat rooms). Merryfield suggested that threaded discussions are advantageous because they are linked to a course homepage, the instructor can control the structure of the discussions, and the “postings” provide a searchable database of student comments and interactions. While electronic threaded discussions are not commonplace in social studies classrooms, the technology needed to facilitate such discussions is not new or expensive. Still, examples of students engaging in threaded electronic discussions are hard to find in schools.

## Purposes for Face-to-Face Classroom Discussion

Classroom discussion serves several educational purposes because it is a unique form of classroom talk, and a very special group dynamic. Discussion requires students and teacher to talk back-and-forth at a high cognitive and affective level, both with one another and the subject matter being discussed. Dillon explained this by stating, "What they talk about is an issue, some topic that is in question for them. Their talk consists of advancing and examining different proposals over the issue" (1994, p. 7).

Discussion is thought to be a useful teaching technique for developing higher order thinking skills<sup>3</sup> skills that enable students to interpret, analyze, and manipulate information. Students explain their ideas and thoughts, rather than merely recount, or recite, memorized facts and details. During discussion learners are not passive recipients of information that is transmitted from a teacher. Rather, learners are active participants. Discussion, when combined with probing, open-ended questions, requires students to organize available information for the purpose of arriving at their own defensible answers. Engle and Ochoa (1988) suggested that the following types of questions should be evident during classroom discussions: definitional questions ("What does that mean?"), evidential questions ("What reasons can you give for your belief?"), speculative questions ("What if that hadn't happened?"), and policy questions ("What should be done?"). These types of questions are needed to stimulate student thinking and guide classroom discussions.

For discussions to educate students, they should be serious interactions where students "support their ideas with evidence, where their opinions are subject to challenge by their peers as well as the teacher, and where the teacher's ideas are equally open to criticism" (Engle & Ochoa, 1988, p. 47). The purpose of probing questions and discrepant viewpoints is to encourage interactions and to encourage students to respond with the most powerful evidence available to them.

Discussion serves to unite the cognitive and the "social aspects" of the classroom. Cazden (1988) referred to this when suggesting that immediate feedback is available, during discussions, to whatever is said. If it is unclear or controversial, those listening will inform the speaker. Understanding is critical during discussion. Discussants, thus, become very conscious of those with whom they are discussing, and present ideas with the social awareness that others are listening.

## Potential for Electronic "Threaded Discussion"

With the use of the Internet for providing a forum for threaded discussions, perhaps the same benefits of group interaction during a classroom discussion could occur in an electronic environment. Clearly, limitations of time and place are reduced; discussants do not have to be in the same room, at the same time, to interact with each other. In addition, electronic formats may serve to reduce the teacher's authority, and allow students to assume more authority during the discussion (Warschauer, 1999). This could serve to make the discourse more democratic.

Today, media and computer technologies play increasingly prominent roles in many aspects of our lives. We can access information easily and communicate smoothly and effortlessly. Democratic participation is one of the many areas affected by the current information and technology expansion. This emerging technological form of democratic participation is often referred to as teledemocracy (London, 1995). Advocates of teledemocracy believe that computer technology can increase civic participation, provide communication for citizens across boundaries of time and space, and offer an unmediated form of communication. Teledemocracy is an outgrowth of liberal democracy; it helps sustain a "marketplace of ideas" and "aggregate individual preferences into a collective choice in as fair and efficient a way as possible" (London, 1995, p. 50).

Supporters of teledemocracy highlight many ways in which this form of communication enhances liberal democracy, including: creating a direct link between citizens and the government, which insures the accountability of representatives; providing a mass feedback system, which gives representatives instant public opinion; facilitating direct public participation through plebiscitary devices and direct interaction between citizens and policy makers; allowing for new ways to educate the electorate on important issues; and, creating an excellent information source (Larson, Keiper, & Harwood, 1999; London, 1994; Winford, 1997).

The Internet may hold potential as one of the most rapidly expanding branches of teledemocracy. In regard to democratic participation, it is credited with providing the same enrichment that it has given to many other aspects of our lives: it has allowed greater access to information; created smooth communication across time zones and geographic areas; and, given forums for people with common interests to discuss issues. However, a recent study of possible social consequences of Internet use based on a sample of American households found that the more time people use the Internet, the less time they spend interacting face-to-face with others (Nie &

Erbing, 2000). In addition, nuances such as nonverbal communication, follow-up with points of clarification, and tone of voice are also eliminated when discussants are not able to interact face-to-face.

## **Discussion in the Classroom: Face-to-Face and Threaded Formats**

While those of us who use both classroom discussion and threaded discussions have “anecdotal evidence” about differences and similarities between these two types of student interactions, little research is available that compares the two. For example, while it may intuitively make sense that shy students may be more willing to “talk” electronically, data of this nature is sparse. Likewise, what are the benefits of these two different types of discussion, and what limitations are present with each? Classroom discussion is easily the centerpiece of democratic education because it engages students in the essential practice of democratic living (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Oliver & Shaver, 1966; Parker, 1992). Discussion nurtures critical thinking and moral reasoning (Gall & Gall, 1990; Newmann, 1988; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989), helps students understand the topic being discussed (Dillon, 1994; Miller, 1992; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) and, teaches the skills of discussion itself (Bridges, 1979; Dillon, 1994; Wilen, 1990). It is too early to determine whether threaded discussions provide the same benefits to the student, but a needed first step is to begin identifying the “look and feel” of threaded discussions.

## **METHOD**

Over the past three years the authors of this research attempted to incorporate electronic threaded discussions into preservice methods courses. Combined, the authors have used threaded discussions in 20 class sections, and engaged students in 29 different threaded discussions. The authors have led more than this number of face-to-face discussions. Though these discussions have occurred with different students, and in different courses, student behaviors and responses during these discussions are remarkably similar each time. One consistent similarity is the different interaction patterns among students during the threaded discussions when compared to their interactions during face-to-face discussions.

## Participants

To gather data for this study the authors worked with students in a secondary social studies methods course taught by one of the authors. Students in this course were pursuing their initial teaching certificate, and intended to teach either middle or high school. This course required students to develop lesson plans for using classroom discussion, and allowed students to engage in many discussions about public and controversial issues. The students in this course used computer technology frequently in class, were competent using the Internet, and had access to the electronic discussion boards. The authors examined the students in this social studies methods course because it seemed fruitful to begin identifying the benefits of face-to-face discussions and threaded discussions in a class that taught, and utilized, both forms of discussion.

## Data Gathering

Data were gathered at three points during this course: Twice from classroom, face-to-face discussions, and once from a threaded asynchronous discussion that occurred outside of the classroom. While a threaded discussion and two face-to-face discussions were examined, many of the threaded discussions from other classes over the last three years could have been used. The authors selected these discussions because they highlight many of the benefits, and questions, that occur as students interact during these two forms of discussion. The first discussion utilized a “take a stand” approach (Larson, 1997; Oliver & Newmann, 1972), and followed a class session on classroom discussion as a method of instruction. The second discussion occurred shortly after the classroom discussion, and was a threaded discussion. A question was posted on the class discussion board, and the students were asked to engage in a threaded discussion about the topic. These first two discussions occurred closely together, and examined public issues that were controversial.<sup>1</sup> This was done to examine possible connections between the discussions forums, and to examine whether the classroom and the computer might beneficially serve discussions. The third discussion occurred in the classroom, and allowed the students to engage in a large group discussion about service learning in the middle and high schools.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed by comparing the interactions during the discussions. Field notes were taken for the classroom discussions, while the text for the threaded discussions were recorded at their posting location. Data were analyzed in an attempt to identify common themes about participation patterns and the use of knowledge during these two forms of discussion. To that end, we found using analysis strategies of grounded theory's constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) most useful. This inductive method of data analysis allowed for the development of initial hypotheses from data that was grounded empirically. From the field notes and electronic records, detailed descriptions illustrating interactions during threaded and face-to-face discussion were highlighted. Once these were identified, categories and hypotheses were constructed from the similarities and differences.

## **FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The instructional use of threaded and face-to-face discussions is evolving. It was found that both forms hold promise for helping preservice teachers describe their thinking about topics such as how they will teach, what content is most important, how to assess learning, and how to encourage students to be participatory citizens. As students interact verbally in a face-to-face discussion, their explanations and descriptions are obviously different than during the electronic interactions, where student thinking becomes a reading and writing, not verbal, task. Though the interactions are different, it was found that both forms of discussion provide unique opportunities for students to learn and interact with each other. In the following sections four areas that emerged during comparisons of face-to-face and threaded discussions will be identified. To clarify the findings and ground them in the data, illustrations drawn from field notes and transcriptions provide specific examples of the findings.

## **Declarations versus Clarifications**

One seemingly obvious difference between the discussions held in the classroom and those held online is the definitive tone during threaded discussions. When not reminded, or required, to respond to each other's comments, our students used the online forum to declare "answers" to the initial

question. For example, the first two postings to the class threaded discussion forum were lengthy paragraphs by students. The second post made no acknowledgment of the previous comment. This behavior did not occur during any class discussion. Students still made statements about their beliefs and ideas, but they also acknowledged previous comments when they were face-to-face.

n:After these two postings, we asked students to read each other's posts, and to respond to each other as well as to the initial questions.<sup>2</sup> Students began interacting more on the discussion forum. For example, the next three postings (the third, fourth, and fifth of the discussion) complimented the thinking of the first two classmates, and then went on to make lengthy statements about their own point of view:

Adam: Well, since everyone else so far has taken the side of indoctrination I thought I would look at the other side of the issue.

Brian: Thank you, Adam, for having the courage to take the other side of the situation. However, I have to disagree with much of what you wrote.

Cathy: OK, first I would like to say nice job Jim on using [a particular analogy]. Second, I think it is great that Adam played devil's advocate and that he took the side that no one had. OK onto what I think...

Again, these acknowledgments were the first sentences of the posts, but were followed by declarations. This was not very different than the start of the face-to-face discussion when students made similar comments, such as "Let me build on what Doug just said," or "I hear what you are saying, but it still bothers me." Very quickly, however, the comments made by students during the face-to-face discussions were in direct response to classmates' statements.

By the fifth posting at the discussion forum, a student challenged an assertion of a classmate:

I think I'm leaning toward Adam on this...[H]e is right that there are freedoms in this country that others around the world do not have. Eric, you are right as well that not everybody enjoys those as much as we might. BUT...it's getting better, isn't it? This brings me to my next point. I've heard a lot of talk from you all about the problems with our country and that because we have so many faults we shouldn't teach patriotism. Well, what is service learning (supposed to be) teaching us? That we can do something about those problems!

This type of comment at this point in a discussion is not unusual. Our first face-to-face discussion took until the fourth comment until a request was made for a student to support an opinion with a fact. The difference was the length of time. The electronic statement was not made until the third day of the threaded discussion (possibly because the discussion began on a Thursday and spanned a weekend). Our students needed to clarify a comment within five minutes during the classroom discussion, but they waited three days during the threaded discussion. Additionally, the number of statements where students questioned each other was much lower when interacting online than face-to-face. In general, asking for clarification, challenging claims, or reacting directly to a comment occurred frequently during discussions in the classroom.

We found our ability as teachers to redirect the threaded discussion much different than when we facilitated the face-to-face discussions. It was much more difficult to gain the attention of the group during threaded discussions. We might post an idea, probe, or additional question, but we did not have a guarantee that students read the message in a timely manner. During face-to-face discussions, we interjected comments, or even stopped the discussion, in an attempt to probe a thought or redirect the comments. It may be that students' focus is not on the teachers during threaded discussions, and control issues related to this could influence direction of the discussions.

## **Expressing Passion**

Both threaded and face-to-face discussions allowed the students to express their passionate viewpoints about the topic. When interacting in the classroom, students expressed their passion with persuasive arguments and verbal expressions (such as tone of voice, volume, and the speed in which words were spoken). For example, during a classroom discussion about a local Native American nation's request to hunt Gray Whales off the coast of Washington state, three students loudly proclaimed their support for this request. One student passionately complained that the US government had "a bad habit of breaking treaties with Native American sovereign nations." She continued that the Makah (the Nation making the request) held a treaty guaranteeing their right to hunt Gray whale since 1855. The tone, volume, and rate of speech were that of an engaged and passionate person (and can not be portrayed in this text). Rarely did a student present a personal belief without revealing some degree of emotion. This emotion is very difficult to decipher during the threaded discussion. Consider the following interaction:

Cheryl: About the flag: I salute it because I know what it symbolizes it. I'll teach what it symbolizes. I will also respect those who choose not to salute it, as long as they know WHY they're not. Personally, I respect what not only our forefathers have done in founding the nation, but also what so many leaders and regular old Joe's do every day to try to make it better, and to me that is all wrapped up in the symbolism of the flag. So, remember everyone, that the power to change lies within us, and that's what makes America great. I didn't realize I'd get so heated up about that.

Kurt: Wow! What a heated response from Cheryl! Thanks for telling me how [wrong] I am. I think we operate on complete opposites of the idealism spectrum. By the way, don't get me wrong, I like that I live in the United States. I just think we should let students decide for themselves how much they like it. Therefore, I will never push patriotism. I am all for serving the community, I just think it has nothing to do with patriotism.

Even though Cheryl stated she was "heated," it is difficult to decipher that from the text. Kurt responded to Cheryl ("Thanks for telling me how [wrong] I am"), but it is unclear from this response whether Kurt is indeed "thankful" for being told he was wrong, or whether this was a sarcastic comment. Cheryl did not ask Kurt to clarify the intentions of his comment through the discussion forum. If this exchange occurred during the classroom discussion, these subtleties might be better identified with visual and verbal cues, or at least clarified on the spot.

Our students, however, could use the threaded discussion forum to express their ideas and passions about the topic. Usually this was done with a well-articulated statement that had lively verbs to highlight particular points. Consider how the passion of these two posts is clearly evident:

Randy:

Students should not be forced to blindly accept that America is wonderful, perfect, and the best country in the world. Students should be given the choice of what to believe and knowledge to make that important decision. Most of us would not argue with the fact that certain aspects of American society make deserve praise, others condemnation. Students must be given both sides of the story and taught critical thinking skills to form opinions for themselves. It has been my experience that students get turned off to American history and Social Studies in general when teachers portray America as a wonderful country on a continuous path of improvement. Students hear this message at

school and return home to a very different interpretation when they turn on the news and see evidence that America still has many problems and much room for improvement. These conflicting views inevitably cause students believe their teacher is either lying to them or simply uninformed. At any rate, many will tune out. As a teacher, I will salute the flag, but not because of some blind commitment to a country I know nothing about. There is nothing wrong with saluting the flag if you know what it is you are saluting. This should be the object of all social studies education, to give students information so they can choose what to believe and know why they believe it.

Adam:

It is very true that, as teachers, we have a great responsibility to teach citizenship to our students in the classroom. In my own classroom, I will definitely teach patriotism in the class. I really don't think I could get away without it. Although we still have many problems in America, we also have a lot to be thankful for and proud of everyday. I am thankful that I have freedom in America. I am thankful for each person that fought and died for my freedom. I am thankful that I can openly practice my Christian faith without the fear of being tortured, beaten, arrested, or even killed by the government as it is in many other countries. In these aspects, I am proud for what America stands for and I would hope my students would be as well. Don't get me wrong though. I realize that critical thinking is vital to my students' deep understanding of the United States, but I also believe that critical thinking is sometimes not enough to really show the students how much they should be thankful for. In addition, what's really wrong with feeling a sense of pride about your own country? Having this common emotion can bring people together. It gives everyone a common purpose and creates bonds between people and cultures. The Native Americans in this country obviously feel a great sense of pride towards their culture and their past. Would it be wrong for a Native American teacher to instill that same sense of pride in his/her students? Or maybe that is only indoctrination and the tribal children should instead learn critical thinking skills to really dig deep into the troubles... within the tribe. I think most people would agree that teaching the Native children to have pride in their culture and the culture's success is the best thing. It provides strength and cohesiveness where it is needed the most! I believe patriotism can provide that same strength for America.

In addition, these posts would require a significant amount of time if they were expressed during a face-to-face discussion. Without the presence of classmates in the room, there seems to be less pressure to be succinct, and to allow others time to speak.

Since threaded discussion is a new technology, students are more experienced expressing their passion verbally (during face-to-face interactions) than they are when “online.” While passion and emotion seem to make the discussions more engaging, they also distract from the content of the comments. The emotion of a posted comment is left largely to interpretation (or misinterpretation), while the content is clearly expressed. Our students commented that it is harder and more time consuming to write these opinions than to speak them during class. Several mentioned that they used spell and grammar checks before they “submitted” a post to the discussion forum. These same students were willing to talk with a more “rough draft” style to their ideas when face-to-face.

### Look Who is Talking

It was anticipated that the students who do not often talk in the classroom might share more online. This happens consistently with these classes. A list of possible reasons for the increased participation of all students might include a safer environment when sitting at the computer and not face-to-face, longer times to formulate ideas and opinions, reduced competition to be heard during the discussion, or opportunities to select who to respond (and when to do so). At this point in examinations of threaded and face-to-face discussions, it is not known why students who do not talk in class often do “talk” online. This point alone is intuitive: if you require students to interact on a threaded discussion board, they will (even the quiet students). What is more important is that threaded discussions seem to provide students with an alternative forum for expressing their ideas to their classmates.

Brian was a student in class who rarely shared during the class discussions. His interactions during the face-to-face discussion about the Makah were limited to whispers to a classmate standing near him, and one brief comment about the potential economic impact of selling whale meat through illegal markets. During the threaded discussion, he not only presented his claims clearly and at length, he was willing to take on an opinion that was against all those submitted at that point in the discussion.

As teachers of courses that use threaded discussion, the authors are able to formatively assess students’ understanding of the topic under discussion. During face-to-face discussions assessment was limited to only those students who talked. Complete, accurate records of what was “said” during the discussion are posted at the forum. While it takes a considerable amount of time for students and teachers to read these, it is a very accurate approach for determining who is participating, and to assess the quality of the interactions.

Finally, Kenneth was a student in the class who tended to make irrelevant comments during class discussions. Often he was long-winded about a tangential point, but he spoke freely, and without much awareness that students shared little interest in his points. For example, during the classroom discussion about the Makah's request to hunt Gray whale, students were clarifying the hunting techniques the Makah would use to capture the Gray whale. Kenneth commented that "Indian nets that prevent me from catching Salmon" often frustrate him. The class met this comment with silence, and then continued with the whale hunting techniques without acknowledging Kenneth's comment. Unfortunately, the threaded discussion format did not improve the quality and appropriateness of Kenneth's comments. He made two tangential comments. For example, Kenneth stated:

In Mexico, Panama or the Philippines I could support a family of four very comfortably on \$500/month. A family could do the same for about \$1000/month in Spain, France or Italy. To decide where one wants to live you need more than the GNP to figure it out. Why I prefer the US has little to do with me being born here, but more to do with what I have seen of the world. I like what we can do here.

His classmates did not respond to either posted comment. We wonder how the students responded when they read his postings. We also worry about this student's inability to put together relevant thoughts in either of these two discussion venues.

## Time Demands

Both face-to-face and threaded discussions are time-intensive methods of instruction. The hope, of course, is that the longer time spent discussing a topic will provide students with a deeper in-depth understanding. A benefit of utilizing threaded discussions is that the time demands occur outside of class meetings.

However, when we read the discussions our students were having, the demands of time are present. From the students' perspectives, threaded discussions are more labor intensive than face-to-face discussions. In class, students will discuss an event for part of a class session. They may have to write a reflection or summary of the class discussion as homework, but the discussion has ended. Because the threaded discussion occurs solely outside of class time, *all* interactions are homework. Since speaking is quicker than typing, and listening to someone often takes less time than reading a com-

ment, the time students spend outside of class for threaded discussions increases more. Students participated, but they did complain that the threaded discussions were labor-intensive. Many felt as though they were checking e-mail, and often did not have the energy or time to respond to the class comments.

All of the students have access to computers at home, though not all have Internet access. Our university has numerous computer labs with Internet service throughout the campus. For our students, access was less of a concern than the time spent reading and responding. At other universities, and certainly in K-12 classrooms, accessibility may be a significant hurdle to overcome.

### **Lessons Learned for Using Threaded Discussions**

As use of threaded discussions continues, four lessons have been learned. First, threaded discussions provide a decent forum for our students to interact about public and controversial issues. Students' responses demonstrate that threaded discussions allow for solid academic interactions with others. Several of the students in the class examined talked rarely, if at all, during classroom discussions. All but one of these students posted extensive comments and replies on the discussion forum. Not all quiet students will write to discussion boards, but those students that are quiet thinkers may benefit from sharing their ideas with classmates if they perceive an electronic format to be more conducive for them to "talk." Threaded discussion, then does not replace face-to-face, but supplements it in the same way that a follow-up writing assignment supplements a face-to-face discussion. Second, threaded discussions require a large amount of time outside of class. The time that is needed for these discussions is significant, because students must read classmates' comments, select the appropriate comment(s) to which to respond, and compose a written response. Compared to the face-to-face process of hearing, thinking, and speaking, the time demands of threaded discussions may limit its use.

o :The third lesson is more logistical. When students are not required to post a certain number of times, it was found that less interaction among classmates occurred. Typically, a student will read the initial question(s) put forth by the teacher, and respond to that prompt with a declarative paragraph or two. Reading and responding to other's postings rarely occurs, unless students are asked specifically to read other comments and respond directly to classmates' comments. Students are asked to post at least two

times, and to make at least one of those postings a response to a classmate's post. As with face-to-face discussion,<sup>3</sup> students need instruction about "how to" discuss electronically. Requiring a particular number of postings is one way to help structure the threaded discussion so participation is increased. The fourth lesson relates to the length of the discussion. Face-to-face discussions span one hour. Occasionally these class discussions will last an entire two hour class session. Threaded discussions can last an entire semester because the Internet allows the interactions to transcend the time and place of the discussion. To keep the momentum of the discussion, and to facilitate students' responses to each other, we now limit the threaded discussions to three days. Since students interact over a short period of time, they know their comments will be read, and responses will be posted quickly. Students' interest in visiting the discussion forum is heightened when they know "new comments" will be posted frequently.

## CONCLUSION

Any form of discussion requires student involvement. The authors attempted to describe several advantages that face-to-face discussion and threaded discussion provided for students, and unique benefits of each. These two approaches for encouraging students to interact with one another about issues are very different. As such, different students respond and seem to benefit from each type. Discussion is much more than merely presenting a point of view to others. It involves being receptive to others' comments and having a willingness to refine ones' current level of understanding. Threaded discussions provide opportunities for posting opinions on an issue or to another discussant, but they may not be as effective as classroom discussion at teaching how to interact with someone who holds a different opinion. This may have implications for teaching students about democratic citizenship, where discussing public issues is a cornerstone.

This study poses a number of questions for future educational research. First, do students learn better in one of these two discussion venues? Merryfield (2000) reported that her students advised her "when they thought an upcoming topic could be better discussed online or face-to-face." Whether these requests are due to students' perceptions of their ability to discuss a topic better in one of these formats, or whether the actual learning of a student will be enhanced could carry implications for deciding when to use face-to-face or threaded discussions. A second area to pursue relates to the opportunities to speak that these two formats offer. Does a threaded discussion allow those students who might not share in class a place to present

their ideas and interact with their classmates? Why might students feel more at ease to share online? Several of the “quiet students” shared extensively in the threaded discussion forum. However, during the threaded discussions, a few quiet students did not write their comments very clearly, or for very long, and several outspoken students did not write extensively. Examinations into why students do not feel compelled to interact during discussions, be they face-to-face or threaded, could help teachers gain insight about structuring discussions to encourage students participation (Townsend, 1998).

A third area for research might examine the potential role of “anonymous discussions.” Our students were not anonymously posting their ideas. They knew each other, and sat in class with one another twice a week. Whether anonymity would enhance or inhibit the interactions is unclear. Issues around prejudice, equity, individual accountability, power, and authority might be affected if student comments are anonymous or not. Face-to-face discussions cannot be held anonymously. Whether or not this provides threaded discussions with a unique opportunity for students to transcend these issues is still undetermined.

On the theoretical level, this study provides an initial look into interactions among students during threaded discussions. If discussion is to be used in the classroom, and if current technology encourages the use of threaded discussion, then we must know about the interaction patterns. Threaded discussion, especially in respect to democratic citizenship education, is an instructional strategy that needs to be examined. This study attempts to provide an initial examination of the differences between more traditional discussions, and electronic threaded discussion, and the potential benefits of each relative to the learning objective for using discussion.

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## Notes

1. In the first discussion, students interacted face-to-face about a local Native-American nation's request to hunt and harvest the Gray Whale. In the second discussion, students interacted electronically about the difference between nationalistic indoctrination and national patriotism.
2. The initial questions posed to the students were: "As a social studies teacher, you have a unique chance to teach citizenship. Will you teach students to be patriotic to the US, or do you think that is a form of nationalism/indoctrination? Consider the flag salute, patriotic songs, and other forms of showing "patriotic pride" to America. What will your role be in shaping the future citizens you teach?"
3. See (Larson, 2000) for details on instruction on face-to-face discussion.

**Contact Information:**

Bruce E. Larson and Timothy A. Keiper  
Western Washington University  
Miller Hall 310A; MS 9090  
Bellingham, WA 98225-9090 USA  
blarson@wwu.edu