CIVIL TALKS: ANALYSIS OF ONLINE DISCUSSIONS
IN SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOMS

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by

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The Internet has revolutionized the way we live, the way we learn, and the way we discern public issues. Put simply, a new public square has developed online. Social studies teachers, as social educators, should be well suited to fuse technology and classroom discussions about civic issues. Many argue the social studies classroom remains the most appropriate place to teach citizenship via discussion and deliberative practices. Teaching discussion skills is foundational to an issues-centered curriculum and advocated by social studies educators because an effective democracy depends on the practice of publicly deliberating issues that are important to society. Yet, facilitating classroom discussion of controversial issues has never been easy, and moving these discussions to online spaces presents a new set of challenges altogether.

The purpose of this research study was to understand, explain, and forge new theoretical concepts for online deliberative practices. Data from 4 issues-centered blogs used in the high school social studies classroom were gathered and analyzed. Three findings emerged revealing these new deliberative spaces (a) leaned toward conversation, (b) attempted to balance authentic engagement with needed procedures, and (c) tended to shortcut reason. The findings were interrelated and provided grounding for a Model of Online Deliberation, a conceptualization of such hybrid deliberative activities.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

“The Internet is not only a technology but an engine of social change, one that has modified work habits, education, social relations” (Jones, 1999, p. 2).

Social networking is having a profound effect on all aspects of society not the least of which is education. A full 73% of wired American teens use social networking websites such as Facebook and MySpace (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). By way of another example, after just a decade since the inception of blogs, or online journals, the prevalence of blogging has more than quadrupled going from 23 million blogs in 1999 to 112 million blogs by 2007 (Sifry, 2007). One study of 1,277 students and their parents in 250 school districts found that one in six students had created content with weekly blog postings, mostly outside of school (National School Boards Association, 2007). Among the many social networking tools, blogs offer key advantages as a social studies classroom activity because they are relatively easy to set up, maintain, monitor, and publish.

An increasing use of blogs in the classroom (Hollenbeck, 1998) can be explained in part by the innovative possibilities they provide for discussion. The implications are many for the social studies classroom, where deliberation is central to citizenship education. However, because online deliberation is such a new phenomenon, there is a significant gap in the literature about online discussions as they apply to the context of social studies. By observing online discussions taking place in social studies classes, I
was able in this research study to investigate one aspect of a construct I have identified as digital citizenship education, “teaching young people how to function ethically, responsibly, and effectively in public spaces online” (Drake, 2010, p. 1) thus engaging them in the betterment of their communities. In this research study I describe, explain, and posit a model for facilitating deliberation in this new forum—the digital public square.

The ramifications of social networking on citizens and on citizenship education present a strong rationale for this research study. In this chapter I provide an overview of that which is foundational to citizenship education in the social studies, an Issues-Centered Education (ICE) that focuses on deliberation. I include a synopsis of how such classroom discussions are moving online and the challenges encountered. I summarize the rationale and purpose of my study of online deliberative practices in the social studies, outlining my research questions. I close this chapter by defining a list of terms and explaining the organization of this dissertation. This background information informs my own approach to teaching social studies and to teaching and researching social studies methods.

**Foundations of Social Studies Education**

Meaningful citizenship education in the social studies stems from an inquiry-based, issues-centered curriculum, which is “a teaching approach that uses social issues to emphasize reflective and often controversial questions in contemporary and historic context as a heart of social studies” (Hahn, 1996, p. 25). Colburn (2000) defined inquiry-based instruction as “the creation of a classroom where students are engaged in
essentially open-ended, student-centered, hands-on activities” (p. 42), a method that more closely meets evolving citizenship education goals. A central tenet of Issues-Centered Education (ICE) is to discuss tough issues via deliberative democracy. W. C. Parker (2006) defined deliberations as “social occasions that provide opportunities for discussants to think, speak, listen, and learn together, with and across their differences, about a specified topic” (p. 11). Gutmann (1999) agreed that a democracy should be deliberative if the values of both popular rule and personal freedom are to be maintained, explaining that a deliberative democracy in education places value on the inevitable disagreements that arise in moral controversy.

Furthermore, Dewey (1916) argued for the construction of a citizenship education that connects students to the reconstruction of and betterment of their communities. In Democracy and Education, Dewey stated, “there is a danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools, isolated from the subject matter of real life” (p. 8). Online media open new venues for empowering students with necessary life skills for citizenship in a new democracy—a democracy applying Dewey’s (1916) ideas of an associated way of living, as a social space defined by the practices conducted within and through the conjoined activities. Although deliberation plays a key role in society and in a student’s path to learning to think critically (Hess, 2009), in classroom practice, it often falls short (Hahn, 2010; Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969). In a quest to enhance student deliberation, some social studies educators are introducing social networking into the classroom and attempting to bring to digital citizenship education a similar inquiry-based, issues-centered approach. With this addition, teachers
must consider not only the cognitive and social dimensions of the deliberative educational experience but the technological aspects as well.

**Online Classroom Discussions**

We have seen that when it comes to citizenship education, schools are the first line of defense. Likewise, schools must assume responsibility in providing sufficient digital citizenship education, and the need is now since today’s youth spend about 6.5 hours a day outside of school using media (Curwood, 2008) with 93% of them going online and 64% creating their own original content such as blogs (Lenhart et al., 2010). The need for research in the broader area of the technologically-enhanced social studies classroom is great and might address pedagogical considerations such as teaching democratic abilities, dialogic skills, information literacy, collaborative online authoring, commons-based peer production, multimedia use, and organizational abilities for social progress. Further, social studies scholars see a need to explore, apply, and reflect on the problems and potentials of integrating various types of technologies (M. J. Berson, & VanFossen, 2008; Brush & Saye, 2000; VanFossen, 2006).

The very nature of the Internet is what necessitates a marriage of citizenship education and social networking for several reasons. The Internet has revolutionized our social, political, and educational spheres; it has moved the public square online. Increasingly actualized citizenship has motivated new forms of democratic engagement for a younger generation by organizing support and creating political and social knowledge (Lee, 2008). Be that as it may, social studies researchers maintain that we have only begun to purposefully evaluate technology-based interventions in the area of
democratic citizenship (see Braun & Risinger, 1999; Diem, 2000; O’Brien, 2008; VanFossen, 2006; Whitworth & Berson, 2003).

In light of the great migration to online spaces for vocational, educational, political, and social activities, online deliberation holds great potential for citizenship education. As such, the 21st century social studies classroom is called upon to equip students with the knowledge, disposition, and skills to conduct functioning democratic deliberation online; still, teachers are reluctant to replace traditional teaching practices with technologically inspired alternatives in the social studies (Zhao, 2007). If social studies teachers avoid facilitating online conversations surrounding issues of school and social conflict, problems will emerge. If teachers avoid discussing problems young people care about, students will leave the classroom strategically unprepared for the consequences of their actions whether those actions are at home, at school, in the workplace, or online.

When educators do move student discussions online, they must overcome a variety of obstacles. First, one major hurdle in online discussions is avoiding the dangers of misinterpreting texts and assisting students to do the same. Coghlan (2001) argued that it should not be assumed that teachers or students automatically know how to communicate or behave online. He maintained that filtering environments are insufficient and the complexity of information and information sources is increasing; thus, young people need authentic experiences to develop, test, and recreate more workable modes of online discussions. Next, online harassment and bullying are rampant (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). Add that to an already growing list of
negative influences—student exposure to manipulative advertising (Valentino, Hutchings, & Williams, 2004), violence, and sexual imagery—and what you end up with are social studies teachers who are disincentivized from developing and deploying innovative technology-enhanced curriculum. Teachers are pressured by top-down technology mandates, such as fulfilling teacher accreditation standards (Banister & Vannatta, 2006) or paying obligatory homage to technology mission statements, or they simply avoid new technology altogether. The result is social studies teachers who are slow to apply instructional technology in innovative ways (Martorella, 1997; Diem, 2000; VanFossen, 2006) and often those who do infuse instructional technology simply repeat a timeless pattern of applying old pedagogies to new tools (Cuban, 1986). Today’s schools need digital citizenship education to prepare young people to be ethical and effective citizens in digital public spaces, but we have only just begun to observe and purposefully evaluate technology-based interventions in the area of democratic citizenship.

All in all, social studies teachers, as social educators, are in the best position to influence and constructively affect the relevant conversations and controversies surrounding the school environment (Newmann, 1975). Instead, many are avoiding controversy both in the classroom (Hess, 2009) and online. W. C. Parker (2001) argued that facilitating a classroom discussion has never been easy, but the social studies classroom remains the most appropriate venue to teach for discussion and deliberation practices.
Significance of This Study

Unquestionably, the Internet has changed and continues to influence citizenship education and citizenship. Emerging technologies have expanded the dialogic method to social networking realms that allow discussions under a wide variety of mediated conditions. The Internet has moved discussion from the classroom to the computer at satellite sites using synchronous and asynchronous approaches. Yet recent studies involving thick descriptions of what an issues-centered classroom might look like are not easy to find (see Journell, 2011; Washington & Humphries, 2011), and even more rare are descriptive research studies where social networking was used in addressing controversies (see Journell, 2009; Journell & Buchanan, 2011). Thus, at the heart of this study is the need to understand what is happening now in hopes ultimately of improving citizenship education via social networking that applies an inquiry-based, issues-centered approach. This investigation is directed toward high school students because these are the students who are expected to make critical democratic judgments. Collective judgments are best facilitated by an issues-oriented social studies curriculum (Dewey, 1916).

It is important to remember that not only is the pedagogy of citizenship education changing, so too is citizenship. A recent Pew survey found that Facebook users are more politically active than most other citizens (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). They were more apt to attend political rallies and persuade others to vote, and were 53% more likely to vote themselves compared to those who did not use social networks. Bennett (2008) branded a new description for an emerging generation of “self-actualized”
citizens rather than the more traditional “dutiful” citizen they are quickly replacing.

“Actualized” citizens have a diminished sense of government obligation, yet a higher sense of individual purpose than previous generations. In contrast to traditional citizens who believed “duty” demanded their participation in government, “actualized” citizens favor a loose network of community action. Networking technologies allow young citizens to become political actors, rather than political subjects, making their own connections with friends and peers. This new generation is more apt to identify with a cause rather than with a cause’s sponsor. They are searching for identity in the political and social causes with which they choose to associate.

Examples of this new citizen activism include the impact of social networking pioneered in the 2008 presidential election. Facebook groups were organized by young citizens to register voters, and two of the most popular YouTube videos, Obama Girl and a conservative message supporting John McCain, were created independently by young voters (Bennett, 2008). More recently in March 2012, a YouTube video about indicted Ugandan war criminal Joseph Kony got international attention and moved young people around the world by attracting 86 million views in one month. Individuals are interacting in all sorts of digital common spaces even though they have not fully learned what it means to be a citizen in a digital world, thus creating the need for digital citizenship education and distinct pressures for a technologically deployed social studies classroom.

Given changes in youth culture, Bennett (2008) argued that civic organizations can no longer rely on traditional motivating forces in engaging a new citizenship style; rather, organizations and educators must work together with students. Bennett believed
that younger citizens must be directed into the political process cooperatively, not by expectations of responsibility or even material gratification. The new civic reality is that this young generation has expanded digital alternatives that allow them to form their own associations. Bennett thus supplied educators with a vision for digital classrooms that will encourage a new generation of citizenship for students seeking a useful, social, and identity-building process. Apparent in his vision are cognitive or task, social, and technological aspects of the educational experience, which also are highlighted by others who discuss the potential for online civic discussions, in particular. According to Preston (2008), “If media activism becomes an integral part of social networking peer pressure could give way to socio-political engagement” (p. 16). In this vein, Wellman (2001) predicted that new tools would be needed to “help people navigate and find knowledge in complex, fragmented, networked societies” (p. 2031). Tally (2007) concurred:

The real ‘digital divide,’ we have begun to recognize, will be less about access to 

*technologies* themselves and more about who gets to develop the human 
capital—the *cognitive* and *affective skills and habits*—required to use these tools well for a range of purposes [emphases added]. (p. 316)

Common throughout the literature are three dimensions of the online discussion—cognitive or task, social, and technological—that must be considered in light of the online classroom activities.

The tools themselves are here making it essential to raise awareness among social studies teachers of the potential and limitations of a wired classroom to move civics education toward a critical, collaborative inquiry and to develop the same characteristics
in tomorrow’s citizen leaders. Nevertheless, simply having the tools does not guarantee learning outcomes. As such, the literature discussed thus far clearly points to both the need and significance of this research study.

**Rationale for the Study**

An Issues-Centered Education that includes deliberative practices is foundational to citizenship education, and social networking provides both the opportunity and an impetus for social studies teachers to incorporate these methods. However, few actual online deliberations in social studies classrooms have been studied, which underscores the rationale and significance of this work.

First, extensive research has been done to show deliberation is necessary for negotiating differences and thus is foundational both to citizenship education in the social studies and to building an effective democracy (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). Second, a growing body of knowledge is developing around the practice of using social networking in education (Brush & Saye, 2000; Curwood, 2008; Journell, 2009; Journell & Buchanan, 2011; Preston, 2008). Furthermore, with today’s public square increasingly online, social networking not only expands a teacher’s ability to conduct classroom deliberations, but also precipitates additional reasons for doing so. Scholars (see I. R. Berson & Berson, 2003; Crowe, 2006; Kist, 2010; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004) advocate for Internet literacy that requires reflexive habitual thinking skills for constructing messages, interpreting perspectives, and responding to attempts by others to influence one’s responses and actions.
All of that notwithstanding, little research has been conducted that examines the nature of online deliberations in social studies classes. Hence, there is a real need to understand what is occurring right now. Better understanding what is currently happening will lay the groundwork for future research of online issues deliberation that might provide educators with recommendations on how to use social networking to grow responsible citizens in the 21st century. Through a grounded theory approach to studying these new public spaces, thick description of the nature of online deliberation in the social studies emerged, which was the purpose of this study and is discussed next.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to observe blogging assignments in the social studies classroom to describe, explain, and forge new theoretical concepts about online deliberative practices. Put simply, I approached this dissertation research with an interest in building a theoretical foundation for deliberative blogging.

This study examined technology-savvy high school teachers who are engaging in online classroom discussions in the social studies and the development of online discussion activities. Using an approach to grounded theory developed by Charmaz (2006), this study provides a better understanding of the new communication phenomenon of online classroom discussions for educators who are seeking better ways to facilitate digital deliberation of controversial issues. This approach was appropriate to study what is happening in the setting and make a *conceptual* rendering of these actions (Charmaz, 2006). I was interested in developing a fuller picture of online deliberation...
activities, and by researching this phenomenon I discovered patterns that can guide future praxis.

One crucial objective of curriculum scholarship is to provide practical knowledge for teachers (Short, 2007), so readers of this qualitative dissertation will engage in the study’s meaning-making in a systematic and logical fashion to gain insights into what that perspective offers both for theory and practice. Democracy as a lived experience requires adaptations to changing contexts, but understanding precedes adaptation. Thus, understanding was a key goal of this study as illustrated in the research questions below.

**Research Questions**

The following research question guided this study: What is the nature of the deliberation generated on four issues-centered blogs used in the high school social studies classroom? Informed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999), who examined critical inquiry in a text-based environment, the following three sub-questions branch out from the main research question and better allowed me to explore the nature of deliberative activities:

1. How does the cognitive or task dimension evolve online?
2. What are the social dynamics of the online group?
3. What technological aspects do participants encounter during the online activity?

These few, broad sub-questions informed by elements of the educational experience (Garrison et al., 1999) guided the research but still allowed me to maintain a holistic
understanding of the active nature of online problem solving rather than simply focusing on any particular variables that surrounded the activity.

The findings of this study are intended only to show what these spaces look like and to analyze the practices through the lens of grounded theory. The general research question above has guided my inquiry and shaped this study; nevertheless, I tried to approach it without preconceived notions about online student discussions in their many forms, some of which will be defined next.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms used throughout this research are defined here to provide clarity:

Blog: (short for web log) A hierarchy of texts, images, media objects and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an html browser (Winer, 2003). Blogs are different from other Internet tools in that their primary purpose is to facilitate discourses (Blood, 2004).

Blogging Activity (aka Online Discussion or Online Deliberative Practices): These are the terms I use interchangeably to refer generally to the Internet-based classroom activities under study.

Citizenship Education: A set of learning experiences that promotes effective and responsible individual decision-making and behavior within the constraints of democratic values and processes (Cherryholmes, 1980).

Debate: The process of inquiry and advocacy, a way of arriving at a reasoned judgment on a proposition (Freeley & Steinberg, 2009, p. 6).
**Deliberate:** To weigh carefully both the consequences of various options for actions and the views of others (Mathews, 1994, p. 110).

**Deliberation:** A discussion with the primary goal of deciding between two choices in issues of controversy (W. C. Parker & Hess, 2001). To reach consensus by way of careful consideration (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002).

**Dialogue:** A sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions, and certainties that compose everyday experience. A process for transforming the quality of conversation and, in particular, the thinking that lies beneath it (Isaacs, 1993, p. 2).

**Digital Media:** *Digital media* refers to the creative convergence of digital arts, science, technology, and business for human expression, communication, social interaction and education. *Digital* refers to a form of electronic media where data are stored in digital (as opposed to analog) form (Digital Media Alliance Florida).

**Discourse:** A passage of connected writing or speech (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001, p. 72).

**Discussion:** A kind of shared inquiry the desired outcomes of which rely on the consideration of diverse views (W. C. Parker, 2003, p. 129).

**Information Communication Technologies (ICTs; aka new media):** New technologies requiring emerging literacy skills that include blogs, word processors, video editors, World Wide Web Browsers, Web editors, e-mail, spreadsheets, presentation software, instant messaging, listservs, bulletin boards and many other unimagined innovations (Leu et al., 2004, p. 1571).
**Social Network Site:** Web-based services that allow individuals to (a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

**Social Networking:** Online communication using a particular type of ICT such as Facebook, MySpace, or Twitter that allows individuals to interact, share information, and form groups (Kist, 2010, p. 2).

**Summary**

The hope of increasing critical thinking skills among students and online dialogic civility among citizens motivated this study. This dissertation is divided into 6 chapters. In the first chapter I have provided an introduction and rationale for the use of grounded theory in an investigation of the emerging practice of classroom blogging and concluded with the initial research question and overview of the study. In chapter 2, I review the current literature about deliberative democracy, Issues-Centered Education (ICE), digital citizenship education, and classroom deliberative blogging. In chapter 3, I detail the study and methods used. In chapter 4, I provide background information. In chapter 5, I present the findings. I conclude in chapter 6 by reviewing the major findings, discussing the implications and limitations of those findings, and suggesting directions for future research.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to lay a foundation for the study by reviewing literature about citizenship education as it relates to online deliberative practices in the social studies. I have organized the literature from general to specific in a pattern that correlates with the sub-questions that have guided this study—the cognitive or task dimension, social dynamics, and technological aspects of deliberative blogging within the context of social studies. Informed by the model of Garrison et al. (1999), my sub-questions align also with the characteristics Oliver and Shaver (1966) proposed as workable solutions for structuring complex dialogues: intellectual (cognitive), effectual (task), and procedural (social). Additionally, this study is undergirded by the philosophical and theoretical foundation for integrating technology in the social studies laid by Doolittle and Hicks (2003), with constructivism providing grounding for the cognitive or task dimension, social dynamics, and technological aspects of online deliberation. I will introduce constructivism in this review of the literature and expand on it in chapter 3 as the overarching philosophy that guided this study.

The following review of the literature begins first very broadly by examining the role of deliberation in a democracy and how deliberative democracy involves the cognitive or task dimension of the educational experience. Next, I explain how deliberation plays out in what many scholars agree is foundational to the social studies, an Issues-Centered Education (ICE), and I show how ICE and the social studies are distinguished by the social dynamics of the educational experience. Then, I explore the
new construct of digital citizenship education, which considers the technological aspects of the educational experience. Finally, I focus on how deliberative classroom practices are being extended online. I conclude this chapter by showing how classroom deliberative blogging involves all of the dimensions of the online educational experience—cognitive/task, social, and technological—before disclosing the philosophical underpinnings in a full discussion of the methodology in chapter 3.

**Deliberative Democracy Involves the Cognitive or Task Dimension**

Civil dialogue and critical reasoning skills are at the heart of deliberative theory, which proposes both theoretical and practical means to confront social issues via deliberation (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Theoretically, difference not only is welcomed but is required in the deliberative process to resolve complex issues. Philosophically, deliberative democracy is holistic, involving both cognitive and social dimensions in terms of constructivism, which guides my worldview and is explained in chapter 3. A nuanced understanding of constructivism; however, reveals how the act of deliberation especially involves the cognitive or task dimension since “knowledge is the result of active cognizing by the individual for the purpose of satisfying some goal” (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003, p. 6).

The challenges of teaching deliberation across differences, however, include questions of indoctrination. As a result many social educators approach deliberative education by way of values clarification, a necessary step in a moral education. Additional challenges of praxis include being able to accurately assess deliberation and being able to weather community and institutional blowback from bringing divisive
issues into the classroom. This section expands on these important ideas about deliberative theory, deliberative education, praxis challenges, proposed solutions, and classroom discussions.

**Deliberative Theory**

Gutmann and Thompson (2004) offered a theory of why the best form of democracy is deliberative. They argued that citizens and their representatives are morally accountable for the decisions that maintain the substance of our legal system. A public mediation space that encourages differing views is therefore required where disagreements are possible. Democracy offers no guarantee that moral disagreements can be resolved, and in fact, a deliberative democracy will often end in unfair results. What the deliberation process provides for is the best opportunity for engaging fair-minded moral actors toward the provisional resolutions of intractable social problems. A deliberative theory offers an approach that justifies fundamental disagreements as a virtue in a democracy because, within a range, opposing moral values can be justified.

Abortion rights may be the most intractable issue of today, so Gutmann and Thompson have chosen the abortion issue to make their argument. They maintain that some reasonably stated moral right-to-choose arguments can be ethically sustained on both sides of the debate, yet are beyond resolution and thus must seek a justifiable means for mediation through deliberation. Democratic societies benefit from the process of constant deliberation whereby democratic citizenship is enhanced for the following three reasons. First, talking across differences increases moral empathy (hooks, 1994; Allen, 2006). Second, deliberation leads to moral growth (Dewey, 1939). Finally, deliberation
leads to moral accommodation (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004), a goal that fits with rationales of citizenship education for civics knowledge (Patrick, 2003) and civic skills (Newmann, 1975).

Gutmann and Thompson (2004) advocated for decisions based on moral accommodation, which involves fairness and reciprocity applied in deliberative communication of core democratic values that lead to mutual respect. They defended the “morally committed character of individuals who are self-reflective about their commitments, discerning of the difference between respectable and merely tolerable of differences of opinion, and open to the possibility of changing their minds or differing their positions at some time in the future if they confront unanswerable objection to their present point of view” (pp. 79-80). Carter (1998) ascribed the principle of accommodation to Americans’ unique cultural sensitivities to religious and other differences based on our founding liberal principles. He argued for a more robust tolerance that requires an acceptance of criticism and is necessary for democratic living, one that Gutmann and others argue is the purpose behind a liberal education (Bérubé, 2006) and public schooling (Dewey, 1915).

**Deliberative Education**

Liberal neutrality supports the educational methods of values clarification, which enjoys widespread use in schools throughout the United States (Gutmann, 1999). Proponents of values clarification identified two major purposes of a moral education within the schools. The first is to help students understand and develop their own values.
The second is to teach them respect for the values of others. Advocates of values clarification view it as the logical alternative to indoctrination:

In place of indoctrination, my associates and I are substituting a process approach to the entire area of dealing with values in schools, which focuses on the process of valuing, not on the transmission of the right set of values. We call this approach values clarification, and it is based on the premise that none of us has the right set of values to pass on to other people’s children. (Gutmann, 1999, p. 55)

Values clarification in a deliberative democracy is not to be misunderstood for an argument that accepts moral compromise without disagreement. Gutmann asserted a “deliberative democracy” provides both a theoretical and practical framework across any citizenship curriculum by learning the process of mediating substantive legal values. All social issues are political, therefore, politics are unavoidable. All political decisions necessarily have winners and losers. It is incumbent upon teachers to both stimulate and prepare students for an issues-debate that involves healthy, enlightened competition. Gutmann argued that it is not enough to claim an argument is politically motivated; participants in a deliberation and debate are required to defend their moral positions then back their claims. A deliberative education, one that values the mediation of controversial issues in the classroom, therefore, offers the best opportunity for both moral and social growth.

Brighouse (2003) agreed that greater capacity for tolerance in students is needed, but added nuance to the definition in what he referred to as, “mutual civic respect”. He
contrasted this distinction with mere tolerance. “When we are merely tolerant, we refrain from coercing those with whom we disagree, but when we accord them civic respect we take them and their ideas seriously” (p. 79). Engagement in intellectual conflict builds, not breaks, mutual civil respect and builds autonomy in students. This kind of autonomy-building is the moral responsibility of schools, according to Brighouse. He made this clear by describing the process in which autonomy-building can take place: “Teachable skills can enable us to avoid or overcome many instances of non-autonomy. Broadly speaking, the capacities involved in critical reflection help us to live autonomously” (Brighouse, 2003, p. 66).

**The Challenge of Praxis**

Assessing an effective deliberation is a challenge for researchers. When teachers apply a deliberation of controversial issues intermittently and informally in their practices, it is difficult to separate what other factors might have had an effect on grades (Hahn, 1996; Hess, 2008). In general, when attempting to study deliberation researchers struggle with data collection and analysis.

Hess (2008) reported that studies of deliberations that focus on political content alone are rare because they rely on finding appropriate cases, which are equally rare. More often, the classroom teacher has few integrated issue discussions and invariably teaches with other classroom methods. Seixas (2001) found that classroom climate remained a considerable challenge in a problem-based curriculum. He speculated on why teachers may not be more receptive despite the sound arguments and some positive empirical results. Discussions of controversial issues are more often used to mediate
conflict, and it is often hard to tone down a conversation rather than fanning the flames of controversy. Inquiry-based approaches embrace confrontation by inviting taboo topics into the classroom (Hunt & Metcalf, 1955). Bickmore (2005) provided several news accounts of how parents are quick to overreact to the mere discussion of polarizing issues, such as race and gender. On the surface, these sensitive topics seem contradictory to peer mediation and anti-school violence programs. Bickmore contends that looking for and stimulating conflict-issues should be widespread as researchers attempt to identify and promote a more thoughtful class, but is often in conflict with other school-related goals of and compliance to zero-tolerance policies. If taught in a closed environment, these strategies might backfire. The results are students with poorer political attitudes and political skepticism.

There are studies, nonetheless, that claim a well-structured discussion of issues can increase a student’s political knowledge that other scholars claim has a relationship to political efficacy and engagement. In a case study involving 10th graders, Hess and Posselt (2002) reported that an increase in grades corresponded with more active participation in discussion. The main limitation of that study’s findings was its narrow attention to performance outcomes. The findings and analysis focused upon a combination of interviews along with statistical correlations of grades. Such keen attention on test performance obscures the more important aim of classroom discussion, how were skills developed in order for students to get better scores? For instance, if the students were simply discussing what items were likely to be on the test, it is hard to imagine that their conversations provoked a critical understanding of the issues discussed.
The process of discussion should aim also at making students better at deliberation, and as a result, better critical thinkers. Increasing deliberative abilities also helps individuals learn how to be decisive and how to reach a group decision when a situation calls for it. As a practical matter, however, consensus is difficult in classroom deliberation so taking a class vote is an option (Bickmore, 1997) and reflective writing is a commonly suggested procedure in the social studies as a form of consensus (see McMurray, 2007; W. C. Parker, 2006).

**Proposed Solutions**

Oliver and Shaver (1966) recognized the limited solutions that research can provide. They offered that teachers must be well informed about the process of discussion and came up with their own conclusions. As previewed earlier, Oliver and Shaver offered dialogic theories as a possible solution – turning away from simple dichotomies such as student-centered, teacher-centered, or democratic vs. autocratic. Instead, they look at identifying three-dimensional characteristics of complex dialogues being the main unit of analysis for the discussion. These dimensions are intellectual, effectual, and procedural, which in short, are characteristics within a dialogue that have different but necessary functions in making a decision.

The intellectual and effectual aspects of a discussion most directly correlate with the cognitive or task dimension of reaching consensus through deliberation. The procedural aspect, on the other hand, addresses social dynamics such as affective considerations, communication norms, modeling behaviors, and structural components. Gutmann and Thompson (1996) summarize the tension that arises and suggest “neither
the principles that define the process of deliberation nor the principles that constitute its content have priority in deliberative democracy” (p. 27). They suggest the tension of this dichotomy is best channeled into dynamic interaction between procedure and outcome. In other words, the cognitive or task dimension of reasoning and reaching a group decision (outcome) should be balanced with adequate procedures. A lack of procedures could result in ignoring pluralistic perspectives and styles of communication, thereby threatening cooperation (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). An overemphasis on procedures could attenuate a discussion rendering it merely transactional and is also vulnerable to favoring the majority voice.

Oliver and Shaver (1966) argued for more research to develop sophisticated dialogues, but more importantly teachers must develop their communication skills through experience and a defined structure. A defined structure is an important and practical tool for teachers who would consider incorporating issues discussions into their classroom. It inspires teachers who are first-time users, and provides adaptable ideas for reflective teachers wishing to compare and fine-tune their existing practices. Evans and Saxe (1996) offered the following four principles as foundational to an issues discussion:

1. In-depth understanding is important. Topics must be covered in their full complexity, rather than episodically or informally inserted into the course of study.

2. Topics must be connected. When they are incorporated into a broad disciplinary structure of a social science course, or as part of a topical unit, the issue must be well integrated within a pre-existing curriculum plan.
3. Content must be challenging. A simple ‘bull’ session or informal debate is not what defines an issues-centered approach.

4. Students must have influence. Teachers are there to guide the meaning-making process, not to design fixed solutions to contrived problems (p. 4).

The right methods are also needed; so Evans and Saxe (1996) gave the following directions. First, an issues approach can only be effective if the problem is authentic, meaning it engages the interest of both the teacher and the student. Next, in order to sustain interest, the editors suggested that a variety of resources be used in instructions which would not only include traditional materials, such as textbooks and lectures, but would ideally include the media that students use to inform their interests. This would include multimedia, Internet resources, and new forms of digital communication.

Subsequently, students must sustain these tools in application. In other words, they must communicate. Instruction is two-way and communicative where all voices must be heard in the classroom. Finally, the classroom must create the kind of culture that on the one hand challenges thinking and on the other hand values personal difference. Maintaining civility in disagreement is both a challenge and goal.

**Structuring a Classroom Discussion**

Well-grounded methods for a well-structured issues-centered discussion in the modern classroom are hard to find in the research (Hess, 2008). Hess maintains when the discussion of issues is studied, it is often mischaracterized by the teacher, and then misreported by the researcher. W. C. Parker and Hess (2001) established a typology to clarify these misunderstandings. Most discussions, they argue, fail due to the absence of
training on how a good issues discussion could be structured. A typology is useful because it provides structure needed for critical discernment by matching methods to intended objectives.

Larson and Parker (1996) used grounded theory to investigate the process of a classroom discussion by asking five social studies teachers to reflect upon their own practices. The teachers categorized their activities as “bull session”, “dialectical discussion”, “problematical discussion,” “informational discussion”, and “quiz show”. W. C. Parker and Hess (2001) identified types of discussions that have distinctive and practical aims for classroom teaching. Of those distinctions, deliberation and seminar provide the most useful understanding of the various strategic approaches to a purposeful issues discussion. The primary goal of a deliberation is deciding between choices in issues of controversy; whereas, a seminar is primarily intended to fully understand the issue itself.

A deliberation, the focus of this study, requires action between various ideas, arising from the practical need to choose; therefore, the exchange of ideas is emphasized. A classroom debate is one example of a deliberative activity. Undergirding the concept of deliberation is the understanding that decisiveness is sometimes required of citizens. A deliberation without decisiveness and that does not result in a group decision is talk for talk’s sake. On the other hand, a seminar requires the deep reflection of an idea or ideas, most often inspired by a text; therefore, content understanding is the emphasis. A reading circle over an important text exemplifies a typical seminar. It is helpful to bear these distinctions in mind when analyzing both teachers’ and scholars’ conceptions of an
issues-based discussion. What one finds in research analysis is that discussion practices are multi-dimensional tasks in classrooms that often serve many curricular goals.

Perhaps more typical than either of those types is a three-stage discussion, where the teacher prompts, a student answers, and the teacher gives feedback (Larson & Parker 1996). Also known as the IRE (Initiate, Respond, Evaluate) pattern and most commonly referred to as a recitation, teachers and researchers often mistakenly characterize the IRE pattern as a classroom discussion. In her meta-study, Hess (2008) found inconsistencies in the research between teachers’ objectives and how an issue discussion was actually being practiced.

Discussion studies have a history of relying on self-reported data and often use student and teacher descriptions incorrectly (Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969; Hess, 2008, 2009). Teachers identify IRE, as well as other forms of classroom ‘talk’ with a discussion of controversial issues when in actuality ‘talk’ is merely disconnected opportunities for the students to speak. Teachers employ classroom talk to reverse the traditional power relationships, from teacher dominance to student. In light of greater participation, some might view all student talk as democratic. Although ‘talking’ in this sense can serve democratic purposes, most often what teachers label as ‘discussion’ is all communication used to improve classroom climate. This leads to an over reporting of what was originally conceived, a meaningful discussion of issues. Hess (2008) believes that while openness is a precondition to democratic discussions, “an open classroom climate is not a proxy for an issues discussion” (p. 128).
Hahn and Tocci (1990) found evidence of robust critical dialogue in the classroom. They identified three aspects of teaching that were required: content, climate, and pedagogy—again aligning with the sub-questions of this study. Having reviewed five studies to see how successfully these critical elements were addressed, they found only two studies used issues or conflicts as a framework for discussion. They then concluded from these two exemplary programs that students were learning how to handle the difficulties of ambiguity and conflicted viewpoints without succumbing to either indoctrination or moral relativism. This evidence suggests that researcher-teacher collaborations are successfully applying critical discussion frameworks. The challenge remains, however, in motivating more students and teachers to engage in a critical discussion framework.

**Section Summary**

Many curricular scholars have theorized the pragmatic idea that democracy is deliberative, but they acknowledge the difficulties of deliberation in education. Bringing controversial issues into classroom discussions is rife with challenges, including community backlash, student development, and effective assessment. Social educators are encouraged not to avoid conflict but to embrace it as a means to a moral education. Likewise, addressing controversial social issues in the classroom is the focus of an Issues-Centered Education, which will be discussed next.

**Social Dynamics Distinguish the Social Studies**

A second concern of democratic citizenship involves social dynamics, which help to define the *social* studies and an Issues-Centered Education (ICE). Perhaps Vygotsky’s
(1978) Cultural Historical Theory best explains the integral connection between social dynamics and learning. Put simply, Vygotsky believed learning to be a social process that takes place when students at different levels of development interact. In the next chapter, I will expound on Vygotsky’s theory as a major influence on my own philosophical leanings as a social constructivist.

Like deliberation, the social studies and ICE entail both cognitive and social realms of learning, but a social constructivist lens, which has its foundational origins in Vygotsky’s theory, focuses on the social or interactive nature of learning. A defining principle of social constructivism is that “the construction of knowledge involves social mediation within cultural contexts” (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003, p. 11). This focus on learning via social processes and shared discourse distinguishes an Issues-Centered Education, which is supported by many but is not uniformly embraced.

Educators have long agreed that a public education is foundational to citizenship goals (Cremin, 1961; Galston, 2007; Judd, 1918; Spring, 1994); however, the path to a citizenship education has been marked by disagreement (Kliebard, 1995; Knight-Abowitz, 2002). Social studies are distinguished by a social aim (Wesley, 1937) as is an Issues-Centered Education (ICE). Among the many routes to a citizenship education in the United States, ICE has guided educators toward a democratic destination but not without controversy. Ochoa-Becker (1996) summed up the dilemma, definition, and promise of this approach:

By definition, public issues are controversial. They involve multiple points of view, with ideas and insights from many fields of study, including the humanities
as well as the social sciences. In dealing with public issues, citizens must analyze, create, and appraise evidence, and, most importantly, make decisions. Consequently, an issues-centered curriculum emphasizes not only content, but also the development of advanced intellectual abilities. Instead of memorizing textbook facts, students define problems, actively search for and evaluate evidence, make defensible decisions, and engage in projects that impact persistent and pervasive real-world issues. An issues-centered curriculum offers the greatest promise for improving citizen participation and the quality of democratic life in this society. (p. 1)

ICE distinguishes itself in that it emphasizes the democratic process of decision-making.

**Background of Issues-Centered Education**

Broadly speaking, social educators historically have been divided by two curricular approaches toward a citizenship education—the social science approach, where subject matter competency remains central, and the social studies approach, where integration of all the social sciences occurs. Time and space mandate the truncated explanation that follows for this paper, but Evans (2004) provided a full discussion of this philosophical divide.

**Social Science Curriculum**

Bruner (1977) supported a social science curriculum by claiming the *disciplinary structure*, or concepts and methods, of a subject area should guide how students discover knowledge in that subject area. These structures are the essence and reflection of accumulated human curiosity. For example, students in a government class would learn
the building blocks of politics and be guided to think politically, whereas, students studying history would learn chronological benchmarks and historical methods of inquiry. The goal of education becomes “disciplined understanding” by way of “discovery learning through the disciplines” (Bruner, 1977, p. 122).

**Social Studies Curriculum**

Alternatively the social studies focus on an instructional approach that integrates the social sciences. This concept of an Issues-Centered Education emerged during the progressive educational era in response to the fact that social science advocates were promoting the traditional disciplines of history and civics. Wesley (1937) traced the term *social studies* to 1905, when it referred to the integration of sociology, economics, and civics. By 1911, history could be seen in various definitions. Wesley emphasized that a social aim distinguished the social studies [original emphasis] from the social sciences. The term *social studies*, indicates content and objective are primarily social (p. 4).

For instance, students in a social studies class learn about history and other subject areas by considering social issues such as labor conditions from a holistic perspective. Among an array of approaches, Stanley and Nelson suggested a particularly radical change to replace entire disciplinary structures (Evans & Saxe, 1996). This begins by renaming courses from history, economics, geography, and so on, to social studies titles reflecting the social change to occur upon resolution of an issue.

In comparison, other programs appear less radical. Oliver and Shaver’s (1966) ‘jurisprudential’ approach, suggested a more incremental integration of issues-studies throughout a student’s high school experience that can be inserted into various social
science disciplines. For example, U.S. history sufficiently allowed a chronological insertion of topical issues. Educators suggested a topic – defined as a general problem and historical crisis – organized around existing curricular plans. A topical unit would use films, case law, books, and magazines that inform a single issue of the student’s choosing. The unit plan then follows a carefully crafted outline that distinguishes each possible value conflict and the various arguments that would naturally develop in discussion and debate. For additional examples of like-minded approaches, see Engle and Ochoa (1988) and Hess (2009).

**Competing Influences and Curricular Changes**

Thus, in the wake of a rising tide of competition for control of social studies curriculum reform emerged a series of scholarly alternatives to a citizenship education, which were the roots of an issues-centered curriculum (Evans, 2004). These reform-minded alternative curricular approaches and materials were developed and eventually discarded for various reasons ranging from the resistance of a conservative mindset to the fact that democratic educators have a principled aversion to over-reliance on textbook materials (Judd, 1918; Shaver, 1992; Galston, 2007). Despite their many forms throughout history, variations of ICE all shared a progressive bent. What follows are two different perspectives that guide contemporary Issues-Centered Education, namely, reflective inquiry and indoctrination.

**Contemporary Rationales of Issues-Centered Education**

Progressive social studies educators have long argued that curricular decisions should be democratically decided based upon common values (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). A
rationale for curriculum design must be predetermined by the beliefs of the journey’s planners. However, educating our youngest citizens whose moral capacities have yet to be defined lies at the center of this dilemma. While agreement may be found on the core values that inform productive citizenship aims, a common pathway toward citizen action and social change is a matter of intellectual and practical disagreement.

Stanley (1981) described the split between the two primary stances toward progressive reforms, the balanced reflective inquiry of progressive educators, often labeled relativists, and the action-oriented inquiry of critical theorists, often labeled social indoctrinators. The former group calls for an education whereby students “experiment” with ideas to resolve social problems on their own giving them the means after schooling to pursue social agency. The latter group advocates for an education whereby students learn to think critically by designing a curriculum that challenges the social order and provokes social change (Giroux, 1980; Stanley, 1992, Slattery, 1995). The debate between these two camps that is explained below is long running and as a practical matter may itself be a distraction from pursuing pragmatic solutions.

**Reflective Inquiry Approach to ICE**

The reflective inquiry approach allows individuals to act independently while at the same time maintaining meaningful social relationships. Unlike snap judgments or common sense thinking, reflective thinking is sustained thinking that breaks the “conservative reliance on the past upon routine and custom” (Dewey, 1910, p. 154). Reflective thinking includes “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further
conclusions to which it tends” (p. 9). When reflective thinking becomes a reflexive habit, decisions are based on intelligent inquiry rather than a myriad of unfiltered facts that students have to know. Students who are untrained to think reflectively are more likely to be persuaded by “passions” rather than “reasons” (p. 25).

In like manner, Engle and Ochoa (1988) supported reflective thinking in part to mitigate the overly deductive thinking that is a product of enculturation from earlier grades. A high school teacher’s emphasis, given the students’ socialized tendency to think concretely, becomes a process of counter-socialization. These scholars deemed such a strategy developmentally appropriate. Whereas facilitating concrete thinking is the pre-adolescent norm, older students now need to learn to discriminate abstract nuance and contradiction. In short, Engle and Ochoa proposed instructional strategies for high school teachers to stimulate cognitive dissonance. Once momentum is built in conversations, they purported, students will reflectively keep the ball going. Adversely, whenever a teacher tells students what the “right” answer is, that teacher is preempting the learners from exercising their own intellectual abilities and are thus increasing the children’s dependence on authority. In other words, the teacher is allowing the students to sidestep reasoning.

Young children engage in hypothetical thinking even though such thinking must take place in reference to concrete objects or as found in their experience, whereas older children have the mental capacity to make abstract connections outside of experience (Engle & Ocha, 1988, p. 85). Formal operational thinking emerges in adolescents who are beginning to grasp a variety of perspectives, but too often have been instructed to
hastily rely on concrete answers provided by the teacher. Engle and Ochoa suggested various distancing strategies such as prolonging induction or inviting speculation. Based on Seigel’s recommendations, they supported the strategy of placing cognitive demands on the child in order to draw the child’s attention to discrepancy and contradiction. As a result, the child is encouraged to think outside the box, and they should be encouraged to do so together, placing cognitive demands on each other. The emphasis is on stimulating cognitive dissonance, a mental process whereby students break from dependent norms on authority to resolve logical contradiction.

This approach aligns with Dewey’s (1910) argument that reflective thinkers will be unsatisfied when alternative solutions are absent. Reflective thinkers will seek better solutions than those presented. Dewey maintained that a bad habit, learned in schools, is hard to break and must be replaced by the reflexive habits that reflective thinking provides. Reflection is one kind of higher level thinking and is important in a social education because when students are unprepared, thinking only superficially, they are vulnerable to being misled by harmful beliefs of others. Critics of this approach claim reflective inquiry leads not to social progress but merely to relativism. Stanley (1981) argued that in order for a progressive education to be effective, students must be empowered to make a real difference in concrete social problems, which is where critical theory begins.

**Critical Theory Approach to ICE**

In contrast to reflective inquiry, critical education scholarship argues that the radical claims of indoctrination are a legitimate purpose of schooling (Stanley, 1992;
Slattery, 1995; Giroux, 1980). *Indoctrination* can be defined as a one-sided presentation of a debatable issue to “assure a favorable outcome for a pre-determined point of view” (Flew, 1967, pp. 282). Educators and scholars who sometimes define themselves as social indoctrinators support a number of critical theories of various labels, including neo-Marxist, poststructuralist, and postmodernist (Stanley, 1992). The common thread of indoctrination theories is a rationale that seeks to expose students to the hidden truths of power imbalances that preserve the status quo. Critical theorists bring a variety of new political theories into the curriculum, including critical literacy, critical race theory, eco feminism, and queer theories, which expose students to new controversies (Slattery, 1995, p. 238). These topics are necessarily controversial and include issues of sexual identity, racial tensions, and gender inequity. A critical position considers issues that may be hidden in the curriculum that require a critical examination, beginning with the textbook itself, but also includes investigation of popular culture, consumer forces, and maybe most interestingly, the power structures that insist on mandatory schooling (Apple, 2000).

Any comprehensive discussion about power imbalance must include Freire, who gave scholars a foundational understanding of how critical thinking can be understood and practiced. Freire’s (1997) dialogic methodology is fundamental to any citizenship curriculum committed to social change, not only as a pedagogical tool, but also as a method of language deconstruction. Deconstructing the imbalances of power relations embedded within dialogue exposes the inherent asymmetry of power within a society that could make even a democratic society illiberal. For instance, consider how words such as
‘working mothers’, ‘minority candidate’ or ‘laborer’ used in a particular context will often reveal that a vocabulary was chosen, carefully or through willful neglect, to maintain illiberal power imbalances. How we think about a concept is dependent on the descriptive language chosen purposely for maintaining a social order. The purpose of dialogue among citizenship educators is to raise first their own consciousness, then that of their students, about the social conditions being investigated and the way language mediates the perceptions of the world. Freire insisted: “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (1997, p. 79). Freire’s critical pedagogy offers a radicalized democracy—radicalized by teachers and students engaged in active listening and critical learning.

In agreement with Freire, Stanley (1981) challenged the liberal progressive movements of the past such as the Social Reconstructionists as not being critical enough of the problems shaping an unbalanced society. He advocated for more radical problem posing where the social issues were undoubtedly more controversial than a traditional reflective approach. More conventional ICE approaches fail by not exposing isolated students to the reality of a dominant culture. Hidden cultural forces shape our political, economic, and educational institutions and a failure to recognize the inequities of power leaves students inured and inactive, but more importantly, unable to act when times are critical. More “critical multicultural social studies ask us to deal with ‘controversial’ themes with our students, to engage them via these affirmative relationships, and to take action around student/community-identified and student/community-defined issues of any quality, inequity, or injustice” (E. W. Ross, 2006, p. 163). Whereas traditional
citizenship is consumed with the process of decision-making, critical theorists demand results—social change through direct action (Giroux, 1980).

**A Comparison of Critical Theory and Reflective Inquiry**

Upon inspection, the principles between reflective inquiry and critical theory are closely related as can be seen in the core concepts behind a critical multicultural education. Cochran-Smith (2004) said critical theory influences are seen in a *collaborative resonances* approach. She argued that by bringing heterogeneous perspectives together, in other words to “teach against the grain”, advocates for social justice reform will transpire through a multicultural education” (p. 28). She provided the following six principles (p. 65) as a guide for teaching social justice against the grain:

1. Principle 1: Enable significant work within a community of learners.
2. Principle 2: Build on what students bring to school with them – knowledge and interest, cultural and linguistic resources.
3. Principle 3: Teach skills, not gaps.
4. Principle 4: Work with families, not against them.
6. Principle 6: Make inequity, power, and activism explicit parts of the curriculum.

In fact, reflective inquiry echoes many of the above mentioned ideas from critical theory. First, holding high expectations for engagement in “significant intellectual approach” mirrors the many calls by reflective ICE reformers that curriculum must be well structured. For example, the ideas of *The Harvard Public Issues Series* offered well organized research materials and values mediation. Oliver and Shaver (1966) described
this as the ‘jurisprudential’ approach, which requires both structure and academic rigor. This aligned with similar rationales by Engel and Ochoa (1988), Gutmann (1999), and Barton & Levstik (2004). Another similarity is found in Dewey’s (1915) learner-centered concept that has influenced ensuing ICE approaches and matches up with the second principle above that the issues must be related to the interest of the students. The classroom is simply a social microcosm where myriad social issues can naturally evolve in the context of schooling. Other principled similarities are an emphasis on skills and on the alternative assessment of skills. Reflective inquiry approaches share an emphasis on knowledge construction and teaching effective forms of communication skills. A meaningful discussion of issues is essential to ICE (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Gall & Gillett, 1980; Hunt & Metcalf, 1955; Oliver & Shaver, 1966; W. C. Parker, 2006).

The final principle appears to be where reflective and critical approaches converge and divide, a confusion that requires full explanation, beginning with similarities. Multicultural understanding examines structural barriers to justice. Multiculturalists openly discuss race and racism, equity and inequity, oppression and advantage, and work against the backdrop of social, organizational, and structural arguments of schooling and society that perpetuate inequity. This appeal aligns directly with the Hunt and Metcalf (1955) curriculum that focused on taboo issues, controversial at the time, such as divorce and school violence. These authors provided entire chapters each devoted to uncovering social problems including: Power and the Law; Economics; Nationalism, Patriotism and Foreign Affairs; Social Class; Religion and Morality: Race and Minority–Group Relations: Sex, Courtship and Marriage. While these topics appear
controversial, Giroux (1980) argued that the political influences of state-run schools constrain the conversation on such topics. Further, there are hidden inequalities within the curriculum unknown to the teacher that serve to perpetuate power imbalances in the schools and in society. This results in a confusing question: where then are controversial questions derived?

**The Practical Reality of Both ICE Approaches**

Lingering social problems must be defined and decided somehow by someone, and therein is the dilemma for classroom decision makers and a possible division between two apparently commensurate approaches. Spring (2006) argued that in the absence of any authority, values decisions are not organic and must be mediated for appropriateness; therefore, some intervention is required, whether it be the “state-run schools, outside influences, or philosopher kings (p. 29)”. This leaves the open question of whether a democratic classroom is possible under reflective inquiry or under any other progressive scheme without inspiration from some higher authority as the ultimate filtering device. Spring claimed that Dewey (1967) wrote *Experience and Education* to argue that democratic situations “must be based on complex ‘developmentally appropriate’” deliberations; however, the democratic schemes are unclear to teachers.

Social educators, whether they follow Cochran-Smith’s (2004) blueprint of working with families to define the issues or Gutmann’s (1999) rational yet complex deliberative education theory, face the same quandary. In the end, it is the social studies teacher who is the final arbiter of what issues enter into the classroom and which issues are too sensitive to approach (Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 1999). Too often, teachers may
simply avoid hassle and controversy by making no decision at all, thus also averting difficult issues. For these curriculum gatekeepers (Thornton, 1991), a myriad of concerns (particularly extra time requirements, but also community backlash and other disincentives) converge regarding issues teaching and, in particular, a deliberative democratic approach both in the classroom or online.

Section Summary

In the midst of competing influences and curricular changes, ICE maintains strong support among scholars, who view it from the perspectives of reflective inquiry and critical theory. Although these scholars believe in two different approaches to ICE, what they agree upon is that teaching controversial issues is fundamental to a social education. With the emphasis on social decision-making, social dynamics play a role in these discussions, which are increasingly happening online.

Digital Citizenship Education Considers the Technological Aspects

As detailed previously effective democracy is open and deliberative, but when such an open, deliberative democracy moves into digital spaces the need arises for emerging digital literacies. Avila and Moore (2012) discuss the significance of the technological aspects:

Critical literacy assignments can provide an opportunity for students to transcend test scores and to add their distinct voices to the discourses of authority. Digital literacy can provide an inviting gateway into critical literacy, as students are often more willing to engage in technology-based activities than those rooted in more traditional ones” (p. 32)
Evident throughout the literature of the technological aspects is the perspective of constructivism, which I will discuss in chapter 3 as my guiding philosophy.

Clearly, the Internet is serving as a catalyst for the co-construction of meaning. Li and Bernoff (2008) described the Internet revolution or groundswell as “a spontaneous movement of people using online tools to connect, take charge of their own experience, and get what they need—information, support, ideas, products, and bargaining power—from each other” (pp. ix-x). Ear-budded Americans are ubiquitous, and “this constant connection and limitless expanse of fact and opinion would seem to be the perfect incubator for democratic involvement and participation” (The Ford Foundation, 2007, p.8).

Yet, an uncritical technological euphoria will not be beneficial to the public sphere (Winner, 2005) but rather would yield “unintended consequences of technology” (Tally, 2007, p. 305). Real questions persist about how citizens gather, share, and evaluate information about relevant issues; how they connect with each other; and how they engage in public life. These same questions, then, become relevant in the context of the social studies classroom, where young people are getting citizenship cues and where the Internet’s potential for education and citizenship is only just beginning to be explored and understood.

**The Internet Presents the Need for Digital Citizenship Education**

People are turning en masse to the Internet for knowledge creation and dissemination, so the 21st century classroom, along with other portions of society, is being called upon to take a leadership role in determining the Internet’s place in the
curriculum (O’Brien, 2008), in other words, to provide digital citizenship education. There is “both a need and opportunity to involve much greater portions of our populace much earlier in the shaping of social technical institutions, placing questions about the overall public good at the forefront of attention” (Winner, 2005, p. 8). With an eye on that need, the next two sections summarize the place of social networking in the social studies curriculum and online deliberative classroom practices.

The Internet has affected democracy and citizenship by impacting access to information, access to the political process, and access to issues and debates (Crowe, 2006). It has radically changed commerce. Anderson (2008) described how the Internet has democratized the production and dissemination of goods as well as democratizing the connection of supply and demand (p. 57). Likewise, for educators, the results of this revolutionary force have been threefold: (a) the democratization of information production, (b) the democratization of information consumption and distribution, and (c) the democratization of information curation. In other words, the free marketplace for the production, consumption, and facilitation of democratic ideas is now online and open to everyone with a computer or mobile device and Internet connection. When used as instructional technologies, the Internet and social networking platforms are transformational and revolutionary (see Cappelli, 2003; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Irvine, 2003; A. Levine, 2003; Pittinsky, 2003; Spicer, 2003; Twigg, 2003).

The democratization of knowledge creation has tremendous implications on citizenship and citizenship education as detailed herein. From a positive perspective, social networking motivates student participation and opens up the marketplace of ideas
to all. On the negative side, discernment requires new literacies such as information literacy (Leu et al., 2004); emerging technologies are time-consuming to integrate into curricula.

Anderson (2008) compared the new online spaces to a virtual watercooler, where “we’re increasingly forming our own tribes, groups bound together more by affinity and shared interests than by default broadcast schedules” (p. 40) of traditional media. The people who gather around these online watercoolers are self-selected, “defined not by our geography but by our interests” (p. 40), which has significant ramifications for the democratic process. Technological influences certainly are noticeable in adult life, but are these same changes affecting our youngest citizens in the same ways? Crowe (2006) argued that for the social studies classroom, access does not automatically translate into political participation; educators in the technologically enhanced classroom must guide burgeoning citizens by way of exposure, exploration, and engagement in the political terrain online.

**Addressing a New Brand of Citizenship in Schools**

Young voters born into the Internet revolution, aptly named digital natives, are coming of political age and redefining citizenship practices (Prensky, 2001). By changing the structural nature of communication, new technologies offer greater possibilities for increasing democratic relationships for these individuals in the classroom (Hollenbeck, 1998). While young people have always had great influences on culture, this revolution is distinct. The Internet generation encompasses not only digital users but, importantly, also
digital designers. For the first time in our history, the power of knowledge creation and mass distribution of that information is in the hands of children.

Indeed, the Internet places unlimited information at the fingertips of every wired citizen. The gathering of information via these novel social networking sources allows students to take ownership of authentic classroom activities that have both personal and public benefits. Grant (2006) described the phenomenon of “knowledge-building networks” as collaborative activities where learners take responsibility for their own learning goals, identifying the problems and gaps in their understanding of a subject, and deciding how to solve these problems” (p. 3). Knowledge-building activities are consistent with a constructivist pedagogy, which values a collaborative process of meaning making among students. Because the benefits of learning are directed toward social goals, the collaborative processes and products are active acts of citizenship. When students build knowledge that directly addresses public concerns, they become civic actors, and that is a powerful idea as part of citizenship education in the digital era.

As a result, students are becoming directly involved in politics as knowledge creators. Agents behind political and community organizing are leveraging the forces of the Internet to recruit students into service. Xenos and Foot (2008) described how the process of service learning has worked successfully in politics and touched on the possibilities for the classroom of the future. They argued that engaging young citizens will happen only if Internet communication is transactional. Transactional Internet campaigns invite direct participation into campaign activities by encouraging young constituents to produce and share content (Xenos & Foot, 2008). Bennett and Fessenden
(2006) provided ideas of the kinds of classroom opportunities that are now taking shape. Fourth graders are using their state government’s site to write to their senators. Politicians are using social networking sites to activate interest in voters, such as Facebook and MySpace and those who do were more successful with younger voters (Williams & Gulati, 2007). Political and non-profit organizations are beginning to design engagement opportunities specifically directed toward the mission of schools (Carano, Keefer, & Bersen, 2008).

Social networking, which includes online deliberative practices, is sparking a new approach to youth activism, according to Bennett (2008), who claimed social networking could revolutionize student engagement. Technology serves to coordinate and communicate new forms of social protest. Bennett described how “smart mobs” of young citizens were used to coordinate uprisings in the Philippines that resulted in regime change. Closer to home, he described the Battle of Seattle to exemplify youthful protesters who organized against the World Trade Organization armed with cell phones, e-mail, and YouTube videos. The result was national media attention as young activists became citizen journalists, providing traditional media outlets with audio and video of the event. More recently, Twitter, a platform for micro-blogging or sending 140-character messages, was responsible for allowing citizens to escape censorship and broadcast the democratic social unrest in Iran, fueled mostly by a youthful partisan crowd (Morozov, 2009). In an otherwise closed society, Twitter was used as a tool for democracy.

Around the world, students are already engaging in their communities in new ways, and schools are trying to keep up. Recognizing the value of social networking, the
National School Boards Association (2007) conducted a survey of 1,277 students and their parents in 250 school districts. It found 71% of students use social networking tools weekly, while 60% of students use them to talk about educational topics. Also, one in five students online reports commenting on message posts, and 21% report posting daily. One in 13 students had websites and 17% of the 30% of bloggers post on a bi-weekly basis, mostly outside of the classroom. Schools and their surrounding communities invest in infrastructure, such as servers and software, in order to modernize education while at the same time trying to determine appropriate policies for the use of new technologies. School leadership is committed to bridging productive relationships between the community, the school, and the classroom; transforming that commitment into practice becomes the important next step.

**Some Social Studies Classrooms Are Adapting**

Social studies classroom opportunities such as students directly influencing public policy decisions are now taking shape (Bennett & Fessenden, 2006). Direct access to politicians is possible through social networking forms like interactive surveys providing politicians with student feedback. News websites are being hosted by political organizations and created by students. Through online writing activities, students learn about rights and responsibilities associated with online communication and can influence policy judgments.

Creative and provocative media projects are being undertaken by some students in after-school and community-based programs (P. Levine, 2008). Projects include The Global Action Project (GAP), an independent media production for social change, and
The Main Street Project that encourages Latino students in rural Midwestern communities to “speak truth to power”. Unfortunately, these expressions are more often produced at home rather than integrated into a meaningful citizenship classroom. Levine argued that similar programs conceived in the classroom setting would serve as gateways for activating lifelong civic engagement.

Engagement is taking place in the classroom and so is a focus on developing essential new literacies. Much of the educational literature dealing with Internet use in the classroom emphasizes the importance of developing information literacy skills among students (see, for example, Risinger, 2003; Shiveley & VanFossen, 1999). The ability to discern the quality of information from electronic sources is undoubtedly crucial to students’ success educationally, occupationally, and in civic activity. All 50 states have requirements for media literacy standards, yet the guidelines are not specific on how the curriculum should address this problem (M. J. Berson & VanFossen, 2008). Information literacy requires activities that have been developed for students to identify false claims made by websites in the classroom. For example, 47 out of 53 “higher-performing” seventh graders were easily deceived by the tree octopus site (www.zapatopi.net/treeoctopus), which describes an intelligent creature found in the temperate rainforest (Leu et al., 2007). When students were interviewed, they said that they did not always believe what they read, but the results showed the opposite to be true.

As an antidote to such illiteracy, Criticos (2001) suggested making civics students function as reporters and publish issues of the front page of an online newspaper about their own school and contemporary issues affecting the school. When the overarching
purpose of an activity is the creation and dissemination of knowledge for the public good, a Wiki is the most common tool used (K. R. Parker & Chao, 2007), and Wikis are increasingly being employed in the social studies classroom. Wikis are open-source, citizen-generated information on collaborative websites that allow many people to edit and publish on the same document or presentation. Another case study showed that students were motivated by the constructivist approach of creating Wiki knowledge for a history unit (Heafner & Friedman, 2008). Evaluating source credibility becomes problematic for teachers and motivating for students in the new open-source environment of the Internet.

The Social Studies Classroom is Slow at Adapting Due to Multiple Challenges

Uncritical acceptance of online information is just one problem social studies teachers face regarding the integration of social networking into the classroom. Social studies teachers may be skeptical of Wikis particularly in regard to student research, yet many students continue to rely heavily on Wikis when assigned Internet projects (K. R. Parker & Chao, 2007). Sunal (2008) showed in a case study that searching for information on the Internet was the most common form of citizenship activity. Nine social studies classrooms used a content analysis of online activities gathered from 292 social studies students of all grade levels. The teachers involved in the study, desiring a change from traditional social studies practices, believed that the Internet could provide a useful alternative. Despite these teachers’ optimism, they also criticized Internet knowledge as traditional and one-directional, from Internet source to student. These
teachers underscored the concern that information literacy was necessary when relying on the Internet.

Adding digital citizenship literacy to the curriculum takes time. Knowledge creation, like other problem-based teaching methods, is time consuming and therefore can be a drawback for the teacher. Learning technical skills and then teaching new skills to students eats into the school day and school year already overtaxed by top-down mandates (Cuban, 2003). Also, finding information resources distracts from a traditional civics education that emphasizes political content knowledge (M. J. Berson, 1996). On top of that, teachers may have particular methods they consider reasonably effective and now are being asked to reconsider better methods. Functional obsolescence is a related problem that discourages a reluctant teacher. Just when a workable technology-based method has been integrated, another technological change has made the new teaching strategy obsolete. In light of all this, Quible (2005) concluded that slowness of technology integration in the classroom is not the result of teachers’ reluctance, rather a lack of training and the limited exposure to emerging instructional possibilities. Ultimately, at the heart of these related problems are limited resources, time and money.

Although social networking provides new avenues for citizenship education with potential advantages such as civic engagement; challenges of privacy, liability, and safety persist as well as the fear that online activities will end up being no more than distraction. A survey by Microsoft Corporation/Zogby International (2010) listed the problems that teachers address most frequently with their students. Those concerns in order of importance are plagiarism; harassing messaging; sexting (the inappropriate sharing of
sexually suggestive images); inappropriate personal computer use in school; sharing personal information on the Internet; copyright violations; and pornography. The teachers and administrators surveyed highlighted the need for more formal training in dealing with a mounting list of problems.

Logistics pale in comparison to challenges of a more consequential nature such as cyberbullying, a particular concern whether students are blogging or posting to social networks. A Cox Communication Teen Online and Wireless Safety Survey (Walsh, 2009) sampled 655 U.S. teens ages 13-18 and found over one-third had experienced cyberbullying. Over two-thirds of teens reported that cyberbullying was a serious problem, more harmful than face-to-face harassment. The general public has discovered the online harassment problem with a rash of teen suicides that has garnered national media attention. In one such case, nine Massachusetts teens were recently indicted for driving a 15-year-old girl to suicide in what one newspaper characterized as a symbol of high school bullying (Kennedy, 2010, n.p.). In another incident, a Missouri woman was found guilty for a hoax on MySpace that led a 13-year-old girl to commit suicide (Stelter, 2009). This high-profile case involved a neighbor woman who created a false identity of a 16-year-old boy and formed a false relationship with harmful intent. The student’s suicide and the woman’s conviction for lying online have the potential of making teachers, administrators, and parents question the judgment of allowing into the schools any access to public social networks at all. Although new tools are available to create protected social networking sites for the classroom and avoid the pitfalls of student
harassment that often accompany commercial sites like Facebook and MySpace, events such as these can be devastating.

Less extreme, but also under scrutiny are other adverse consequences students may suffer from spending too much time on the Internet. Information saturation and addictive behaviors are not new issues, but they do take on new meanings online. Sociologists and educators have long warned against the time young people spend on entertainment at the expense of more engaged relationships (Cuban, 1986; Putnam, 2000), and the Internet simply fuels these concerns. The worry may be warranted; the most recent studies show the average child between the ages of 8 and 18 spends 7.5 hours a day outside of school using media (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). Nie (2001) found the Internet can have an isolating effect and becomes a distraction for more meaningful activities that build relationships. Face-to-face interaction and even telephone communication among colleagues, friends, and family have emotional qualities that are missing in text-based conversations. He found that Internet users are less sociable and avoid conflict; thereby leading to isolation. As such, more text-based assignments in school should not reinforce the unproductive and unhealthy student behaviors that are already being learned on the home computer or mobile devices.

Relationship-building is touted as the driving force behind popular social networking tools such as Facebook, so some believe it will counter Putman’s (2000) conclusion that Americans are actually disengaging from public life. Perceiving deterioration in enlightened self-interest, Putman sought to explain why individuals were increasingly unwilling to invest time in volunteering, going to meetings, and deliberating
in organizational concerns. He believes if our network of relationships continues to
decline, America will become a less democratic, less participatory society. One
hypothesis Putman offered in explaining declines in social interactions was that
Americans were spending too much time watching television. There continues to be
support for this conclusion. Orlowski (2007) used the results from 1,700 interviews of
Americans between 15 to 25 years old and found that heavy television viewing led to less
civic action. Putman’s thesis that time spent online could be having the same effect has
been controversial and widely referenced by media critics, thereby, opening the debate to
both advocates and adversaries.

Putman’s critics argue the Internet was subject to contextual misrepresentations
(Fischer, 2005; Wellman, 2001). Their main contention is that the Internet’s functions are
not singular nor does any single user apply just one Internet tool. They claimed new
forms of Internet communication and organization were emerging “underneath his radar”
and actually working to connect people. A second criticism was that online activity was
being characterized as a trade-off with direct communication when in fact others often
found that it supplemented face-to-face relationships (Hayden and Ball-Rokeach, 2007;
Quan-Haase, Wellman, Witte, & Hampton, 2002; Quan-Haase, 2007).

Recent research supports the critics. For instance, the Center for the Digital Future
(2007) conducted a student survey and found that 71% of members said their online
communities were very or extremely important to them. Katz, Rice, and Aspden (2001)
found that one in 10 users have become friends with others online. Finally, Smith and
Rainie (2008) in a survey concerning community and political involvement showed that
Internet users were more likely than nonusers to report engagement in traditional political activity in the 2008 general election.

Many educators believe the most sensible approach is to help develop in students the reflective thinking skills necessary to make good personal decisions regarding online activities. In light of the frayed social fabric of our time, citizenship educators believe deliberative blogging could serve as the duct tape.

There is a Gap in Social Studies Education Research About Online Deliberative Practices

Just as educators are getting up to speed on integrating new technologies, educational researchers are also just beginning to explore the effectiveness of digital social networks in the classroom, particularly as they relate to civic relationships. Lenhart et al. (2008) set out to find how social video games were constructing positive civic relationships. The study found strong relationships between teens that play social video games and their interest in political activities. 12- to 17-year-olds and their parents were surveyed in continental U.S. telephone households. The survey found a strong and consistent positive relationship to a wide range of civic outcomes. For instance, there was a strong relationship found with those teens who take part in social interactions related to the game, such as commenting on websites and contributing to discussion boards.

Educators are interested in whether this same enthusiasm is effective in an educational context, directed perhaps to civic activities arranged during school hours.

Likewise, Swan and Hofer (2008) called for more research in concluding their meta-analysis of technology research in the social studies. They suggested more
investigations in the following areas: technology applications used in diverse school settings, planning preparation time as it relates to technology integration, and uncovering the various barriers to technology implementation and teachers’ attitudes toward such barriers. Their argument is that greater knowledge of teachers’ perspectives may influence how others think about their practices thereby encouraging technology adoption and integration patterns. Swan and Hofer’s (2008) analysis revealed that social studies teachers continue to apply new technology tools to traditional teaching methods.

Having better tools does not necessarily relate to achieving better methods (Cuban, 1986; M. J. Berson, 1996). For example, evaluation studies impose new technology programs upon students in a non-typical classroom procedure (see Brush & Saye, 2000). By introducing a well-structured approach to discussion into what was atypical of classroom practices, a Hawthorne effect (Adair, 1984) occurred whereby students expected more successful outcomes as study participants. Frequently, in evaluative studies participants react differently and often more positively to meet the researcher’s expectations. Findings are likely to make unjustifiable claims about the effectiveness of the intervention in such studies. Brush and Saye’s evaluation case studies offered an improvement when compared to more incremental approaches. They repeated their technology interventions over prolonged periods to reduce the testing effect.

Researchers agree that methodological weakness limits the effectiveness of technology studies in producing the desired instructional effects. M. J. Berson (1996) found methodological problems in all but one out of 51 studies. These problems included insufficient treatment definitions and descriptions, inadequate sampling procedures, and
incomplete reporting of statistical results. Swan and Hofer (2008) maintain that good research requires extended study in the field, and deep descriptions that qualitative methods offer, not simply anecdotal evidence that qualitative research too often produces. All of these researchers concluded there is little empirical evidence on which to base decisions to integrate new technologies into social studies instruction.

**Section Summary**

As digital citizens emerge from schools, they are reshaping communication with new practices such as social networking and blogging. In some segments of society this has provided useful communication changes. Civil discourse, on the other hand, requires the productive mediation across a variety of differences, differences that today are greatly influenced by technology. Schools are best positioned to educate students and the community that communication differences exist and that it is a shared responsibility and a unique social studies challenge to devise solutions. However, the list of online dangers to students is so long, potential consequences are so large, and precautionary measures can be such an administrative burden or liability that some teachers and most administrators want to avoid confrontation altogether at a time when and in a venue where public deliberation is most needed, underscoring the technological aspects of deliberation.

A deliberative democracy depends on citizens who can negotiate differences to find compromise and build consensus to both public and private problems that are social. Due to the many challenges described above, social studies classrooms are particularly slow to adapt to the new needs of digital citizenship education; therefore, educational
research in this area is also lagging particularly when it comes to studying online deliberative practices, and these practices hold good promise.

**Classroom Deliberative Blogging Involves Cognitive/Task, Social, and Technological Dimensions**

Blogging is a relatively new practice. Scoble and Israel (2006) detailed how blogs have changed the way businesses talk with customers, but it is clear that their findings can be extrapolated into the realm of education. Holtz and Demopoulos (2006) thus described the blogosphere as a “conversational network.” Blogs are different from other Internet tools in that their primary purpose is to facilitate discourses (Blood, 2004). Blogs are effective community-building tools; however, they are distinct from other social networking by emphasizing self-expression and feedback rather than social entertainment. ‘Posting’ is more formal on an educational blog. ‘Postings’ are self-expressive writings that begin a blog discussion and are designed to solicit readers’ comments.

**Blogs Are Well Suited but Not Always Supported in the Classroom**

Blogs were not originally created for deliberation, but they are among the new online spaces where public issues are being discussed. Blogging tools align with many learning objectives and are particularly well suited for the social studies classroom; however, such activities require institutional support. As mentioned before, school administrators are often leery of the public nature of all social networking even though making student voices heard and opening them up to criticism is part of a social education. One study found six in 10 districts have rules against participating in bulletin
boards or blogs (National School Boards Association, 2007). More recently, in May 2012
New York City Schools prohibited teachers from interacting with students on Facebook
due to affective problems and liability issues. Witte (2008) claimed administrators tend to
overreact when the discussion of critical issues is too controversial and when the
conversations of a classroom become transparent online. When a classroom blog is
publicly posted, criticism from the community is both a goal and a problem. This is the
unique challenge of expressing ideas about controversial issues that, as detailed earlier,
many believe should be fostered in a social studies education. Witte (2008) found
positive results in another case during middle school blogging when a parent joined the
discussion group. The relationship of enjoying and talking about books together, which
the parent was reading while stationed in Iraq, motivated the students and the parent.

Despite concerns of high school administrators, limited social networking is
occurring and is officially sanctioned. Some 35% say their schools and/or students blog,
either officially or in the context of instructional benefit (National School Boards
Association, 2007). Blogging conversations can transcend classroom limitations.
Feedback among all participants can be more frequent and timely especially when a
student’s question arises outside of the classroom. For instance, a high school pre-calculus teacher observed that students responded to each other’s problems often on
Saturday nights (MacBride & Luehmann, 2008). Upon reflection, the math teacher
discovered that he was better able to know the nature of a student’s problems by reading
blog postings. He believed a student’s cognitive struggles are hard to read during the
limited class time but reveal themselves better in the written comments posted on a blog.
Another teacher recognized that quieter students in the classroom often join a blogging conversation as a preferred form of communication (Richardson, 2003). Developing a social presence in the virtual classroom facilitates learning (Rovai, 2007).

Collaboration skills, regardless of the subject area, are important to a citizenship education. Discussion is effective in group problem solving and blogs are flexible, making them a good discussion tool. In a case study, Borja (2005) showed how blogs were effective at inspiring conversations: “What I’m most attracted to in Web logs is the empowerment of the student voice” (p. 1). “Many of our students . . . don’t often feel like they’re heard. And here they have a tool that gets them noticed” (p. 10). Risinger (2006) echoed many arguments for social studies teachers to blog, including that blogging is flexible, economical, expressive, collaborative, and equally effective at cognitive and social educational objectives.

**Facilitating Online Deliberative Practices is Unique**

Rather than avoiding controversy or persuasion; social studies teachers are encouraged to seek out diverse social, economic, and political perspectives (Kubey, 2004; Crowe, 2006), and blogging’s deliberative capabilities are rife with teachable moments. Young people are particularly subject to misperceptions in a digital environment and often fail to understand the nuances of perspectives and opinions designed by their sponsors to persuade. Students can be made aware of how the Internet often oversimplifies complicated controversial issues. When discussed on a blog, political advertising itself can be a source of curriculum materials that build a healthy skepticism if students consider its persuasive nature. For instance, one study showed that political
ads on the Internet only perpetuate political ideologies of uniformed adults while having no effect on the knowledge gap (Valentino et al., 2004). As political organizations seek to present knowledge on the Internet, students must prepare to make judgments based on what positions are truthful and, from that, decide which positions they support (Carano, Keefer, & Bersen, 2008). Critical judgments are obtained through guided experience in authentic activities having students analyze through blogging discussion the forces behind ideological fractures. Sunal (2008) found social studies teachers that rely more on the Internet to inform their students believe political literacy is required.

Facilitation skills are paramount in guiding student understanding and successful online communication (Paulson, 1995). A major hurdle in moderating online discussions is avoiding the dangers of misinterpreting texts and assisting students to do the same (Sherry, Tavalin, & Billig, 2001). Without tone and other nonverbal cues such as voice, intonations, facial expressions, and gestures, blogging discussions can easily breed miscommunication and misunderstanding (Harasim, 1993). As a result, conflict of ideas or interest may be difficult to resolve for discussion groups that do not have a relationship offline.

Therefore, educators must also consider emotional and social needs of the students not only in the classroom but also online because the Internet demands different literacies. Time-independence brings flexibility to group members who are part of asynchronous discussions but not without some sacrifice. Perhaps the biggest challenge that arises is one of added distance if discussants are separated by time or space. Ironically, the medium that uniquely provides instantaneous feedback capabilities also
allows for delayed response or acknowledgement – which can result in a sign of rejection by the group. Without immediate feedback, members may experience a form of communication anxiety or a feeling of speaking into a vacuum (Feenberg, 1989). This unpredictable lag time between sending and receiving messages diminishes social cohesiveness (Davies, 1989), which in turn impacts the quality of a discussion.

The other side of the coin is text-based Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) create a democratizing effect that has the potential to enhance classroom deliberative practices. Online communication frees individuals from the status development and differentiation constraints of face-to-face communication and enables communication at the level of ideas (Harasim, 1993). Sometimes the seeming absence of gender, race, socioeconomic, and physical cues creates the possibility of a more level playing field and is inviting to otherwise reticent members of the group. Olaniran (1994) added that the simultaneous nature of communicating to all members encourages the free exchange of ideas and further equalizes the power-distance relationship.

**Educational Research About Classroom Blogging**

A typology for classroom blogging rationales might help elucidate educational practices (see Larson & Parker, 1996; W. C. Parker & Hess, 2001). A reading teacher wanted to increase the literacy of her students, and her *reading circle* blog became a tool for student self-expression available for public comment (Witte, 2008). In another instance, a math teacher wanted students to collaborate on tough pre-Calculus questions, so his blog was used primarily to have students assist each other’s learning (MacBride & Luehmann, 2008). This might be referred to as *scaffold* blogging. In any case, if the
process is not communicative (two-way), by definition, it might not be considered blogging.

Scholars in a variety of disciplines have discovered blogging in the secondary classroom has many merits. First, it can help students make connections with their peers. Many researchers have found that blogs extend relationships, between students, between teacher and students, and between schools and communities (MacBride & Luehmann, 2008; Ray & Hocutt, 2006; Richardson, 2003; Risinger, 2006). By its nature blogging is interactive and, through conversation, conducive to relationship building. Since learning is a social process, a second potential benefit of blogging relates to better classroom performances. MacBride and Luehmann (2008) found that community-building was essential to successful outcomes when studying actively on a math and science blog. Her case study found empirical evidence that cooperation was facilitated by reminders and affective supportive compliments from peer to peer. Still, researchers remind us that participation is not a given. Two pitfalls include simply assuming students will participate because of the online medium or neglecting the social dimension of an online forum (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003). Third, the nature of the blogging process can precipitate self-questioning, revising, discussing, and reflection necessary to develop more critical thinking skills (Tam, 2000). Finally, integrating classroom blogging can move students to learn. Student motivation is facilitated through blogging and other social networking because the new technologies appeal even to students who are reluctant to engage in the traditional classroom (National School Boards Association, 2007). These and other advantages make blogging in the classroom appealing. Still, discussions in the
high school social studies classroom are too rare and understudied (Hess, 2008). Educational scholars are just beginning to talk about blogging activities in the social studies classroom.

**Blogging as a Constructivist Practice in Social Studies**

Doolittle and Hicks (2003) provide a strong rationale for adopting a constructivist perspective when applying technology in the social studies classroom. For now I will introduce the perspective, but in the next chapter I will expand on constructivism as a guiding philosophy of this study. Doolittle and Hicks (2003) maintain that social studies teachers effectively engage with their students in constructivist pedagogy by leading students to understand how the technology tools lend themselves toward a framework for “active inquiry”. Active student inquiry is reflective and foundational to constructivist pedagogies whereby this approach begins with a “dialogic negotiation and interrogation of people and [technological] artifacts” (p. 20) such as would be the case in a reflective examination of blogging activities. They argue that when students and their teacher engage in reflective constructivist pedagogy, by investigating the technology itself such as a blogging platform, uncritical acceptance gives way to limited instructional improvement. Often, particularly in the social studies technology realm, a persistent and narrow emphasis on unique tools is applied to traditional instructional methods with little pedagogical emphasis. Such approaches can result in stale practices that are abundant, particularly in the social studies, where rote memorization is too often the norm. Doolittle and Hicks (2003) argue that a Constructivist philosophy, while not prescriptive, should aim toward reflective instructional improvements that are necessarily relative and
situational, particularly given the evolving nature of technology. Constructivism as a philosophical framework therefore should not be considered “teacher proof”; however, when students, teachers (and researchers) work to progress toward common outcomes, a “how to” pedagogy will give way to innovation and adaptation (p. 20).

Adaptation in the classroom has not been immediate. A more compelling body of knowledge should derive from the secondary schools, particularly in the unique context of the social studies classroom. MacBride and Luehmann (2008) were able to identify only 17 classroom blogs using five popular search engines, and only four of these were public and used extensively in the classroom. In one nationwide project, Tom Daccord of Boston established a Wiki and a deliberative blog in the Great Debate of 2008, where students across the country participated (Kist, 2010). Some teachers noticed increased student motivation and increased social capital as a result of the blogging activity.

While evidence of deliberative blogging can be found among adults or college students, the insights are limited by contextual differences. Students come to higher education often to prepare for a variety of disciplines that require particular communication and technology acumen. A gap remains in peer-reviewed research that deals squarely with blogging used in a high school social studies classroom for the deliberation of issues.

**Aspects of the Educational Blogging Experience**

Garrison et al. (1999) offer a conceptual framework for researchers to consider best practices of educational experiences that are extended online. The model of
Community of Inquiry applies a constructivist perspective and provides theoretical underpinnings about how online educational experiences might best occur. The model is premised on three essential elements (i.e., cognitive, social, and teaching presence) and a fourth aspect, the learning context or communication mode (i.e., the Internet).

**The Cognitive or Task Dimension.** The first element of the model is that a personal learning experience online is both reflective and meaning-focused which Garrison et al. (1999) label as the “cognitive presence” (p. 88). Cognitive presence also aligns with Dewey’s (1910) practical inquiry model, reflective inquiry. Similarly, Doolittle and Hicks (2003) delineated this cognitive dimension among principles for integrating technology in the social studies via constructivist philosophy, expounded in the next chapter. Online, the cognitive or task dimension might be observed when a learner answers a question based on his or her individual investigation of the issue and includes the hyperlinked sources used.

**The Social Dynamics.** Also aligned with a constructivist philosophy is the second modeled assumption, labeled “social presence” (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 88). Social presence speaks to the social dynamics of the group and holds that online learning, in order to be effectively communicated, must be collaborative and transactional (p. 92). In short, Garrison et al. (1999) define social presence as “the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people (i.e., their full personality) through the medium of communication used” (p. 94). Online, the social dimension might be observed as anything from authentic expressions and emotional language to turn-taking, common ground and shared understandings.
Since cognition cannot be separated from its social context (Dewey, 1910; Doolittle & Hicks, 2003; Garrison et al. (1999), collaborative social presence is seen as an essential aspect of cognitive development. Garrison et al. (1999) echo a Deweyan pragmatism in their modeled assumptions: “The educational process therefore has two sides--one psychological and one sociological, neither can be subordinated to the other or neglected without evil results following” (Dewey as cited on p. 92). Therefore, their purpose in identifying these essential social and cognitive aspects of the online learning environment is not to prioritize one over the other; rather, to understand how each acts in accordance with the other to enhance the online educational experience. Yet Garrison et al. (1999) do prioritize a social constructivist stance by stating how interactivity within the online social environment is an essential precondition to critical thinking, metacognition, and problem solving. Regardless of their priority, the model maintains that when the social presence and cognitive presence are in conflict, the learning goal is distracted. That is why the model of Community of Inquiry practically is predicated by a third component, “teaching presence”, deemed essential as a mediating force (Garrison et al. (1999).

**Technological Aspects of Teaching Online.** The third aspect of the model, teaching presence, is the glue that binds social interactivity and learning outcomes. Additionally, the model situates the three dimensions within a context of the online communication mode, which is the Internet. Thus the technological aspects of online deliberative activities profoundly affect all three dimensions but have pronounced implications on the teacher presence. For example, instructional management addresses
the unique structural concerns of the online learning environment. Teaching presence thus includes considerations of technologies that best regulate discussion or procedural decisions such as group size and length of time devoted to reflection or other parts of the online educational activity. As described throughout this chapter, technological aspects require the teacher, in particular, to make various adaptations.

On the Internet, technological aspects account not only for the functional capability of a given tool, they also consider the strategic application of a particular tool as it relates to a given learning objective. Online instructors might consider how best to regulate when a comment is posted given the emerging technologies available. Within the context of the Internet, instructors should consider how to technically manage multiple small group discussions within a variety of blogging or discussion board functions.

Scholars examining how small groups communicate via the Internet have had similar findings to Garrison et al. (2000), identifying the task dimension, social dimension, and technological dimension of any online group discussion, which always takes place within a particular context of leadership (Engleberg & Wynn, 2010). Clear likenesses can be seen between the cognitive presence and the task dimension, between the social presence and the social dimension, and regarding the key influence that technology and facilitator have on the online group experience. Likewise, the model’s interdependent, overlapping dimensions represent the holistic nature of the phenomenon in practice, while also acknowledging the usefulness that such distinctions can have when seeking theoretical understanding or when providing practical instructions. Illustrating what the Community of Inquiry model looks like in practice is an instructional handout
used in the Great Debate of 2008 (Kist, 2010, pp. 86-88). The educators behind this handout also separated guidelines of this national online deliberative activity into the cognitive or task dimension (i.e., “Student Participation”, p. 86), the social dimension (i.e., “Code of Conduct”, p. 87), and the technological dimension (i.e., “Technical Information”, p. 87).

Realizing that planning or evaluating complex learning outcomes of such experiences is situational, Garrison et al. (1999) argue that each essential element must be considered and will vary relative to the particular educational setting, learning objectives, students, and teacher. For researchers and teachers alike, these scholars have purposely provided commonsense descriptions of the key aspects of the online educational experience, cognitive, social, teaching presence, and online communication mode. By bringing the three elements and online learning context to the fore they provide a springboard for further inquiry.

Section Summary

Within theoretical and applied contexts, this final section of the literature review explored classroom deliberative blogging practices. I have explained how new technologies are influencing citizenship, impacting citizenship education, and presenting problems and opportunities for a technologically deployed social studies classroom. I also introduced the constructivist underpinnings and essential elements of an online classroom deliberation.
Summary

Compelling arguments have been articulated in this chapter of the value to the social studies of deliberative democracy, Issues-Centered Education, digital citizenship education, and classroom deliberative blogging. Few schools fully engage citizenship because of a lack of resources combined with a lack of political will, but today’s social studies classroom has great potential to harness new technologies and develop in students new habits of democracy. The need for more formal research in the broader area of technologically enhanced social studies classrooms is great and might address many innovative methods including the use of student blogging to help young people develop a public voice and contribute to critical discourse about issues. The natural place to work toward these ambitious goals is by considering the nature of what classroom deliberative practices look like online, as participants work toward a solution of social problems. Thus the purpose of this research study is to describe and theorize about online deliberative classroom practices to better understand the nature of the phenomenon.

I introduced in this chapter a constructivist perspective along with the characteristics of a complex dialogue and the elements of the online educational experience, all key to this research study about blogging in the social studies classroom. The literature reveals the importance of the cognitive or task dimension, social dynamics, and technological aspects of teaching online. Today’s citizens and some classes are increasingly discussing issues in the online public square and, as such, present a strong rationale for this grounded theory study, which is detailed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

This study was inspired by my experiences watching high school debaters compare arguments in online discussion forums. As their coach, I observed debaters sharing insights with their competitors, and I wondered if a planned online discussion might have possibilities in my classroom. Later in graduate school, I met two social studies teachers who told me they used blogging as part of their instruction, which raised questions about dialogue on this new platform and ultimately precipitated the research question: What is the nature of deliberation generated on four issues-centered blogs used in high school social studies classrooms? I was curious about this new method and wanted to see what other teachers were doing, which led to the design of this qualitative study.

In this chapter, I outline the methods and theoretical perspectives that influenced the research. First, I present the research questions and locate myself within this study. Then, I expand upon the research approaches and philosophical and theoretical assumptions that informed the study. Finally, I detail the design of the research study, describing the context, the way in which the blogs under study were chosen, and the procedures used for data collection and analysis before concluding with a brief summary of the methodology.

Online Deliberation Research

Recent scholarship has shown that online political discussion forums such as blogs and newsgroups contribute to an online democracy (Davis, 2005; Vergeer &
Hermans, 2008). Social studies educators, who have always been concerned with citizenship development, now must widen their definition of the public sphere to include the Internet and mobile technologies. More and more studies are focusing on democratic classroom practices online (Larson, 2005; Monroe, 2003; Snyder, 2008) as emerging online courses gain traction, so citizenship educators might benefit from an integrated model. As with any process, online deliberations could be improved with a prototype (Witschge, 2008); however, the prototype must conform with the context studied (Freelon, 2010). Hence, there is a need to better understand what online deliberations look like and how they transpire in the high school setting. This study does not embark on testing existing theory, rather, it presents a description and model of online classroom deliberative activities.

**Research Questions**

The main research question focused on understanding by asking, “What is the nature of the deliberation generated on four issues-centered blogs used in the high school social studies classroom?” To better answer the general question, I created at the study’s outset three guiding sub-questions to categorically organize albeit very broadly elements of the educational experience and the context as informed by Garrison et al. (1999).

1. How does the cognitive or task dimension evolve online?
2. What are the social dynamics of the online group?
3. What technological aspects do participants encounter during the online activity?
The first two sub-questions also were informed by Oliver and Shaver (1966), who identified the intellectual and effectual characteristics (which I refer to as the cognitive or task dimension), and procedural characteristics (which I call social dynamics) of a discussion. Thus the intent of this study is aimed solely at understanding and describing the nature of these new deliberative spaces online. It is not my intent to explore theories of cognitive and moral development, but this area presents a valuable direction for future research that I will elaborate on in the final chapter.

My own struggle with developing sub-questions reflected similar dialectics in the literature. Although constructivists approach phenomena such as deliberation holistically, Doolittle and Hicks (2003) suggested a pragmatic perspective that treating categories discretely can be useful in practical application or when examining phenomena in practice.

**Background of the Researcher**

It is important for me to locate myself in this research to help the reader make a fair analysis of the study. My interest in this study was influenced by a background in social studies teaching, educational technology, business management, and banking.

Throughout a 10-year career teaching high school social studies in central and northwestern Ohio, I readily integrated multimedia and used new technologies in my classroom. Outside of the classroom I keep one foot in technology and one foot in civics. At Findlay High School, I coached the debate team, helped advise student council, and served on the technology committee. An ongoing interest in how emerging technologies could improve teaching practices led me to pursue first a master’s degree in instructional
technology and now a doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction. For the last four years, I have been teaching at the university level or working as an educational technologist to collaboratively develop online college coursework.

Prior to teaching, I worked in commercial lending and business management for 15 years in and around Columbus, Ohio, and earned bachelor’s degrees in economics from the University of Michigan and in education from The Ohio State University. Throughout my formal education and career, I have experienced different cultural settings, all involving the need for collaboration and group decisiveness in varying degrees. As starkly different as loan board meetings were from curricular meetings, I realized common strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes larger issues got derailed by a procedural emphasis, and other times too much focus on the big picture resulted in getting little accomplished.

As I reflect on imbalance in these microcosms I consider how it relates to larger issues such as school reform and philosophical stiffness. In my experiences, I most often found the larger rhetorical questions distracted from the needed incremental change in dealing with practical procedures. Bronfenbrenner (1979) put forth a model for research that helps to explain my argument for a more practical understanding of culture:

It is as if within each society or subculture there existed a blueprint for the organization of every type of setting. Furthermore, the blueprint can be changed, with the result that the structure of the settings in a society can become markedly altered and produce corresponding changes in behavior and development. (p. 145)
What Bronfenbrenner is suggesting is that social research maintains a narrow focus and that a complex understanding of the context matters. Narrow foci then may be aggregated to explain the bigger picture. This research, with its emphasis on deliberative problem solving, was aimed at providing such a practical blueprint by narrowly focusing on one type of activity, deliberative blogging.

**Philosophical and Theoretical Disclosure**

By providing disclosure, the preceding section revealed my constructivist leanings. Socially constructed knowledge carries the weight of my own cultural influences as reflected in my background, and will be apparent in my thinking about the data as described. Researchers project their subjective perspective into the knowledge they create, and in so doing, the reader’s ideas and beliefs are comingled. The disclosure of the researcher’s beliefs, and values, must be fairly weighed by the reader as expressed in terms of guiding philosophies (Charmaz, 2006; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Therefore, the implication of sharing my philosophical and theoretical perspectives is an ethical consideration. With that in mind two essential philosophies guided my research—Constructivism and Democracy.

**Constructivism**

As a teaching philosophy, constructivism represents a collection of related learning theories, each different, yet sharing a common instructional orientation. This philosophical perspective influences various instructional strategies, whereby “constructivism involves the active creation and modification of thoughts, ideas, and understandings as the result of experiences that occur within socio-cultural context”
A key pedagogical concern of constructivism is to uncover the unknowing, to find underlying causation, and to practice critical questioning. In so doing, constructivism offers the practical emphasis on “why” and “how” questions, and in educational research, “provides a solid foundation from which to create, implement, and evaluate technology-based social studies (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003, p. 77). Critical questioning is just one of the many practical implications for teachers who maintain a constructivist philosophy.

Bruner’s (1977) constructivist argument is that content knowledge can influence achievement only if students understand the various “computational” processes from which they derived (p. 30). Bruner argued for rethinking the curriculum by emphasizing authentic inquiry into key subject areas such as historical thinking, algebraic logic, creative writing, and other contextual reasoning skills. Teachers who avoid teaching process knowledge are more likely to rely on pedagogies such as textbook teaching, chalk-and-talk, and multiple-choice examinations that serve only to reify conservative thinking.

Educational reformers agree, arguing that instructional technologies have not lived up to their publicity (Apple, 1997; Cuban, 2003). In fact, critics have long argued technology mandates are offered as prescriptive antidotes from top-down officials, ineffective influences from a market-driven culture (Cuban, 2003). Constructivist philosophy offers an alternative whereby power relations in the classroom are guided by a more interactive pedagogy, one that scaffolds authentic reasoning and one that engages a more democratic dialogic (Bruner, 1977; Dewey, 1910; Doolittle & Hicks, 2003). My
constructivist perspective represents a kind of ‘market correction’ leaning away from positivist technology pedagogies such as the computational Internet approaches of “seek” and “find,” which do not go beyond appeasement strategies of worksheets placed online.

As a solution, Doolittle and Hicks (2003) argued for a “grounded framework” for implementing technology in social studies that begins with a conceptual knowledge of ‘constructivism’ as a diverse and useful philosophy (p. 22). Constructivism, they maintained, has identifying characteristics, and the two types that I identify with are radical constructivism and social constructivism. Doolittle and Hicks present a guiding framework for technology instruction, not a prescription for strategy. By modeling how the types of constructivist practices are useful, they illustrated and recommended holistic praxis.

**Radical Constructivism Emphasizes the Cognitive or Task Dimension.**
Radical constructivism, with its emphasis on individual meaning-making, might inspire a student’s internal curiosities. In this case, radical constructivism could mean teaching search engine strategies to facilitate problem solving. Radical constructivists view methods such as deliberation as “social interaction [that] may provide the impetus for an individual to rethink his or her ideas”, rendering methods such as this useful for “individual cognizing” (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003, p. 7). In short, radical constructivists recognize the value deliberating controversial issues has on individual thinking.

**Social Constructivism Emphasizes the Social Dynamics.** The social constructivist perspective, emphasizing interactivity and the social nature of knowledge, is best understood within its foundational origins—Vygotsky’s Cultural-Historical
Theory. Cultural-Historical Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) explains learning is a social process that occurs when individuals at different levels of development interact.

Vygotsky’s understanding of the advancement of culture through cooperative inquiry, in other words, social learning, is his most enduring legacy influencing today’s teaching practices. This potential for learning is what Vygotsky (1978) called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and defined as follows:

The child is able to copy a series of actions which surpass his or her own capacities, but only within limits. By means of copying, the child is able to perform much better when together with and guided by adults than when left alone, and can do so with understanding and independently. The difference between the level of solved tasks that can be performed with adult guidance and help and the level of independently solved tasks is the zone of proximal development. (p. 121)

Vygotsky’s theory supports the curricular argument that “the school should encourage that which is social within the child to blossom on an individual basis” (Langford, 2005, p. 22). What is relevant to the social needs and issues determines the curriculum, preferably in such a way that the child sees the social needs as his or her own needs.

**Radical Constructivism and Social Constructivism Elucidate the Technological Aspects.** Both radical and social constructivist perspectives shed light on the learning potential of integrating new technologies into the social studies. The individual learning of radical constructivism comes to mind readily when considering the infinite resources of the Internet and the need for information literacy. The social nature
of knowledge is evident in social networking, blogging, and wikis, where knowledge is co-constructed via social interaction.

Constructivism and more specifically Cultural-Historical Theory, with its focus on learning as a social phenomenon, keenly informs my perspective and thus served to shape this study that examines how students use online technology to interact with each other while discussing controversial issues. Further influencing my ontological perspective that guided this study was Dewey’s democratic approach to education.

**Democratic Education**

Another social cognitive perspective, Democratic Education Theory (Dewey, 1916), includes a philosophy about the relationship between democracy and education. Simply put, this theory contends that school is the most important institution for the associative habits of democracy. This philosophy emphasizes learning as a natural product of all human associations. Essential to a democratic education are the free exchange of ideas, naturalistic inquiry, and interaction among citizens.

Dewey’s interconnected theories of social knowledge require that teachers also reconsider where social learning occurs—neither separated from society nor from the ideal learning conditions of the school. The contexts should relate to the problem, rather than the problem being shaped by the context of predetermined and inert curricular decisions. Dewey (1916) argued for a theory of knowledge that was conjoined through communication and that demanded a “medium of associated life” (p. 101). “But as civilization advances, the gap between the capacities of the young and the concerns of adults widens. Learning by direct sharing in the pursuits of grown-ups becomes
increasingly difficult” (p. 9). Dewey forewarned a communication gap will expand between young and old (and also between rich and poor) because of the rapid changes of an industrialized society transitioning into an informational society. A democracy depends on broad, if not universal, participation so naturally existent human differences should be narrowed by circumstance or bridged by better communication.

**Deliberative Inquiry Theory.** Deliberative Inquiry is a curricular theory of practical reasoning process and has its deep roots in Dewey’s philosophies (Harris, 1991; Reid, 1979). Deliberative Inquiry Theory is based on Dewey’s (1910) ontology of pragmatic thinking through which Harris (1991) said, “Doing practical curriculum activity is typically characterized by making choices in conceiving, expressing, justifying, [emphasis added] and taking action toward desired states of affairs, in specific situations viewed as integral wholes” (p. 285). Practical reasoning carries two key assumptions. First, problems are not theoretical. Second, it is reasoning the refinement of “stock knowledge” where in practice many theories are conceived and retested (Reid, 1979, p. 195). Reid used the comparison of playing chess in which every move requires constant evaluation of strategy. Deliberative inquiry emerged as a response to the more technological emphasis of curriculum planning, a legacy of the Tyler Rationale, whereby the deliberative processes are lowered to irrelevance by top-down planning mechanisms (Reid, 1979). Deliberative inquiry presents a democratic alternative. With curriculum decisions teachers provide the evidence and expertise to make judgments about a complex process, and thus they in turn perpetuate the democratic ideals of schooling (Dewey, 1915; Gutmann, 1999; W. C. Parker, 1995).
**Research Implications**

Constructivism and Democratic philosophies have particularly influenced how I now think about the research process. Among the analytical methods influenced in this study are: contextual methods for data collection (Wiersma & Jurs, 2004), a process orientation to analysis (Charmaz, 2006) and, as this section reflects, the call to situate the reader within the study (Charmaz, 2006). In particular, curriculum research focuses on holistic renderings of the complex nature of the classroom environment and the constant decision-making that characterizes curriculum making (Harris, 1991; Henderson & Kesson, 2003). In this way, social constructivism practically assumes that human development can be fully understood only within its cultural, historical, and environmental context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bruner, 1977; Dewey, 1910; Henderson & Kesson, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). The reflexive nature of this study has shaped and reshaped my educational philosophies.

In this dissertation study, I describe and explain the process of deliberation among high school social studies students in an online setting. Sociocultural and Democratic Education learning theories are foundational to this research and are evident throughout. Assumptions in this type of qualitative research are that reality is subjective, bias is always present, and values should be openly discussed. I chose the particular methods that follow in an attempt to decrease the distance between myself, the participants, and the reader by using inductive logic and an emergent design.
Research Approach

In addition to the hope of stimulating future investigation, this naturalistic inquiry used a grounded theory approach to spark more questions and to encourage hypothesizing aimed toward a modeled social studies activity—deliberative blogging.

Qualitative Research

A qualitative study is appropriate when investigating a new phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) such as blogging activities and other social networking practices that are emerging as innovative classroom activities. This type of study is necessarily descriptive and applies a variety of methods that are appropriate when studying complex human relationships and their peculiarities in problematic situations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It allows the researcher to interpret and gain insights of new processes in under-examined settings. Qualitative research emphasizes the reconstruction of theories that guide the action of others, and new theories emerge in the process (Charmaz, 2006). For instance, effective discourse has been broadly discussed since Aristotle, yet educational scholars continue to appropriate discourse theories to guide the changing nature of the classroom practice of discussion. Modern discourse theories remain foundational to ideas presented within this study, but those theories must evolve and adapt to the new digital ways citizens communicate.

Grounded Theory

A grounded theory methodology provides the primary lens that directed this study, and that approach aligns with this study’s overarching purpose of abstracting descriptive knowledge into useful generalizations for similar situations (Charmaz, 2006).
Theories emerge through data collection techniques and strategies of analysis that can reflect the thoughts and attitudes of all the participants and how they relate to one another (Parry, 1998). Grounded theory allows for multiple data sources such as Internet conversation, teacher interviews, and published reports (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), similar to the data sources in this study.

Grounded theory methods consist of “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). Using Charmaz’s approach to grounded theory as a road map, this study gave priority to the studied process of deliberation across multiple online classrooms. Thus, grounded theory directed my research toward a holistic understanding of the active nature of online problem solving rather than simply focusing on the product of the activity.

Hine (2000) provided a rationale for research involving online settings, saying since social interaction has migrated online, so too must the methodology (Hine, 2000). “Technology-mediated settings require us to rethink concept of presence and collocation, just as those we study must rethink them in the course of their own day-to-day interactions” (Ruhleder, 2000, p. 3).

As the Internet becomes more and more embedded into everyday life, social research will have to come to terms with it in order to achieve its goals of effectively researching and portraying everyday life. If the people you study move some aspects of their life onto the Internet, then so must you. (Hine, 2000, p. 3)
Hine (2000) made an important distinction, “Interactive media such as the Internet can be understood as both culture and cultural artifact” (p. 2).

**Design**

A full accounting of the teachers, schools, classes, and online assignments will advance the reader’s understanding of the context of this study. Although the next chapter elaborates on the context in great depth, this section provides a snapshot of the setting, an explanation of how the blogs were selected, and a synopsis of data collection and analysis methods.

**Setting**

Participants for this study consisted of high school teachers who facilitated four online deliberative forums. Prior to determining the participants in the study, I sought approval from Kent State University’s Human Subjects Review Board to conduct the study (see Appendix D). Next, I sought permission from participants. Permission was granted by all parties. For the purpose of this study, the names of the teachers, students, blogs, and schools have been changed or concealed to protect individual identities.

**Selecting the Blogs**

Four primary data sources guided this study and were identified using several sampling methods, particular criteria, and an extensive vetting process, all of which are described below.

My main strategy was to use purposeful sampling to find these online deliberative blogging activities. Flyvbjerg (2006) defined this type of selection as information-oriented for the purpose of maximizing “utility of information from small samples
selected on the basis of expectations about their information content” (p. 230). This kind of information seeking case is paradigmatic, meaning those cases that have accentuated characteristics but have no rules or theories to explain them. In order to illuminate they might serve as prototypical instructional activities and, once cross-compared, identifying characteristics could be modeled. Political scholars argue that the theoretical proposition of a deliberation requires both a definition model (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002) and procedural model (Reich, 2007) specific to the setting. Reich referred to characteristic qualifiers as “variation of context” in which he defined deliberative variables as, “the number of participants, time frame, rules for turn-taking” and “procedures” (p. 192). The challenge to this study was paradoxical—to find definitional cases without established definitions to find them. Along with purposeful sampling, I ultimately used convenience and snowball sampling as well. Creswell (2007) explained that snowball sampling “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich” (p. 127). Convenience sampling “saves time, money, and effort but at the expense of information and credibility” (Creswell, 2007, p. 127).

Next I detail the characteristics that delineated a qualifying activity. To be considered for this research, participants should have met the following six criteria:

1. The activity is a blogging exercise for a high school social studies class.

2. The blogging exercise will have taken place as I studied it or have been completed no more than 12 months prior so that teacher interviews are completed in a timely basis. Talking to the teacher during, and immediately after, a particular
deliberative activity would have been ideal; however, regular access to the teacher was not always possible. Teacher interviews are designed to provide timely insights from the analysis of blog postings, such as an awareness of interpersonal conflicts or details about problematic technical occurrences. Teachers were expected to recall the particulars of the discussion activity completed within a school year, especially when prompted by the online postings in separate interviews. Self-reflection at the end of a year is standard within an academic setting, providing further rationale for this parameter. Teacher interviews were also required upon the activities’ conclusions to give a general description of the class culture as well as an overall assessment of the activity. Spending time interviewing teachers at their convenience, upon completion of the activity, invited reflection and provided a more balanced rendering of the deliberative process.

3. The blogging exercise occurs as part of a face-to-face public high school, not part of an independent e-school. Student deliberations within a public education are at the core of this study for several reasons. First, given online discussions of issues is a relatively new idea, I thought it might be difficult to locate e-schools embracing a deliberative discussion online. I expected that issues of accountability and meeting measurable performance guidelines are more the focus of most e-curricula. Second, a comparison between private e-schools and a traditional classroom adds unwarranted complexity to the designed study. A public education, and how online deliberations play out in a social studies classroom, is the focus of this study. While it may be interesting to compare the nature of online issues conversations of private school students to traditional public school students, this comparison simply goes beyond the scope of this study.
4. The deliberation takes place in an online venue with an interactive format that is typically a blog or a blogging feature within a set of online tools. Because a blogging activity is loosely defined as posting an item for comment, there are many online platforms that would qualify so I will use the term blogging to refer generally to all of them. This investigation did not limit itself to common blogging tools outside of education such as Wordpress or Google Blogger. In fact, basic blogging features are embedded in many of the free and open-source communication platforms designed for educators including personal social networks, such as Ning.com and Edmodo.com, and classroom management systems such as Moodle and Sakai. Therefore, the functionality of any particular online platform is relevant to the potential findings of this study and should not be limited, but compared whenever possible. Social networking tools such as Ning and social bookmarking tools such as Diigo provide all of the functionality for traditional blogging, while providing specific safeguards for secondary educators. Thus managing the cognitive or task and social dimensions of an online deliberative activity aligning with the first and second research sub-questions involves the technological choices made by the teacher and provides useful data to teachers and other innovators.

5. Each blogging activity comprises at least 10 participants with an average of at least two posts per student. This criterion is set as the minimum amount of classroom participation that can be analyzed, or else, there simply may not be enough conversation to come to any useful conclusion other than the project did not work.

6. The blogging assignment is deliberative as determined by my observations along with teacher intentions that aligned with the following three characteristics:
a. The classroom assignment will call for deliberation (discussion and consideration of various sides of an issue).

b. Participants will discuss the consequences of various actions based on the assignment.

c. A decision will be reached or attempted.

The final criterion was the most challenging; however, each blog provided some evidence of at least some “attempt” at a decision. Anticipating some difficulty in locating appropriate blogging assignments, I intentionally allowed leeway in this final parameter. For the first blog, students were required to journal, which is an acceptable alternative to group decision-making (see Bickmore, 1997; McMurray, 2007; W. C. Parker, 2006). Also, the teacher’s questions sometimes directed students to make a decision (“Should there be limits on free speech…?”). An attempt at consensus was suggested on the second blog when students were asked, “How would your group have dealt with this issue?” On the third blog, students attempted to reach a decision regarding an online video after the teacher’s prompt, “Do you agree or disagree?” Similarly, on the final blog, students were encouraged to attempt a decision with prompts such as, “Do immigrants hurt or help America?” and “Do you think ‘anchor babies’ are a problem?”

A small sample size, an advantage of a paradigmatic case, was justifiable given the few social studies teachers identified who are engaging their students online in such a way.

Upon defining the parameters, I began searching for blogs that met the criteria. One blog surfaced because of my prior association with the teacher, so convenience
sampling occurred immediately. This was the only teacher selected for this study I knew previously. Once I found one or two possible blogs, the sites or the site owners directed me to other deliberative activity, thus the snowball sampling method took place. For example, offline I queried social studies colleagues and online I queried Ning networks of social studies educators to search for teachers and recommendations of teachers who were blogging in the classroom. In purposeful sampling, I visited free blogging sites such as WordPress, Blogmeister, and Edublog and examined dozens of high school social studies blogs. I regularly used search engines and various combinations of keyword strategies, including “social studies,” “blogging,” “deliberation,” and “high school debate.” Finally, I visited every Ohio high school social studies website in search of classroom blogging activities among teachers who posted their assignments online.

I found and vetted approximately 50 blogs over the course of a year. In all, some 20 blogs appeared to meet the criteria so I began observing and analyzing those blogs. One-by-one after varying degrees of analysis I began omitting blogs from the final sample because I would find them deficient in some key characteristic such as not being interactive or recent. Several more worthwhile blogging activities were located; however, they were from teachers in junior high school or from other disciplines. Ultimately, I identified the following four robust blogs that fell within the parameters of this study: American Studies Blog, Nick’s Blog Page, Tim’s Class Wiki, and Current Issues Blog, classroom blogging activities taking place in four different states throughout the South, Midwest, and East. I elaborate on the context of these blogs, classes, teachers, and schools in chapter 4.
Data Collection Methods

Data collection relied on a combination of observation, interviews, and document gathering as described below.

Observation

Data collection entailed first finding and following public online deliberations by high school social studies classes. Then I began assembling and observing such blog postings that provided an adequate depth and breadth of discussion. Once I located substantive social studies assignments to comprise the data, I utilized full transcripts from four blogs (the sites of the online deliberation) and all of the postings (individual weblog entries) within the blogs. Ultimately, postings from each blog were concatenated in separate digital files for ease of scrubbing, storage, and retrieval throughout the grounded theory analysis.

Each blog was unique. Although initial investigations suggested posts might average 10 to 50 words, the four blogs under study averaged 50 to 200 words per post. Prior to the study I estimated blogs may contain some 100 postings, and the deliberative assignment might span three to 12 months. In reality these blogs ranged from 20 to 200 postings, and individual assignments ran from one week to two months while the blogging activity in general spanned the school year. Such descriptive statistics might not normally be featured in qualitative approaches, but in this case they supplemented the understanding in tangible ways that provided insights into the depth and breadth of a particular deliberation and made possible comparative analyses.
In my grounded theory study, instead of going to particular field sites I was able to “go” to various field connections, which Hine (2000) prescribed. That allowed me to follow and observe the discussions on the main blogs as well as going back and forth on affiliated student blogs and hyperlinked sources, during “a process of intermittent engagement, rather than long-term immersion” (p. 3), and I found that to be informative. I fully immersed myself in the data for four months, but prior to full immersion and ever since, I was able to “observe” intermittently when and as the need dictated. This is a real advantage of observing in the digital sphere. The observational techniques used in this study were further informed by Hine’s approach to, “learn about the Internet by immersing ourselves in it and conducting our [research] using it, as well as talking with people about it, watching them use it, and seeing it manifest in other social settings” (p. 3). Immersing myself in the classroom blogging activities in this way allowed me to mine a large amount of data and, as a result, to develop full descriptions of each, which are presented in the following chapter.

**Interviewing**

This study includes supplementary data from interviews with the classroom teachers. After analyzing the blogging activities, I employed multiple interviews with the classroom teachers who assigned and facilitated the blogging exercises. The purpose of teacher interviews was to co-construct meaning and to uncover contextual information relevant to their students’ online discourses. Theory generation can be enhanced when descriptive data are supplemented with secondary data (Parry, 1998), thus the value of teacher interviews in this study. For example, manifest content is easily observable;
latent factors may lead to assumptions by the researcher that can then be confirmed or corrected after conducting the interviews. The iceberg metaphor aptly illustrates this concept since the tip is easily observable but the bulk lies out of view under the surface of the water.

A grounded theory approach to interviewing suggests that casual interviewing techniques should be used with open-ended questions and informal protocol (Wiersma & Jurs, 2004). Nonetheless, interviews are important sources of data and, as such, a pre-planned question guide is recommended to facilitate but not constrain the interview process. For this reason, a semi-structured interview was conducted (see interview protocol in Appendix A). Advanced planning allowed for multiple opportunities to interview subjects.

I conducted and then fully transcribed three interviews with each teacher. In three cases, I conducted a personal interview and two distance interviews. In one case, all three interviews were via recorded phone call and e-mail. With all of the teachers, the first interview was primarily information gathering to understand and qualify the class and blogging assignment under study. This interview centered on learning about the teacher’s blogging intention. The second interview, ideally conducted in person after I had the chance to perform initial coding of the blogging data, was focused by the interview protocol (see Appendix A) and sought the teacher’s perspective on how the online deliberation went. The open-ended questions were designed to elicit detailed conversation about the process of online deliberation. I conducted the third interview once I had completed a comparative analysis between the teacher’s perspective of the
online deliberation and my own. Follow-up questions during the third interview were conducive to the co-construction of meaning by teacher(s) and researcher.

**Published Documents**

Once a blog was identified for the study, I collected artifacts that added context to the class and assignment. The deliberative activities varied, and the nature of the topic assigned directed the deliberative outcome. Therefore, all documents corresponding to the assignment and assessment of an activity were acquired to see if the communicated goals of the teacher were met. The primary purpose of reviewing assignment documents was to see how the planned deliberative activity aligned with the teacher’s description and expectation of outcomes of the online deliberation. Also, I gathered a significant amount of information about each school from a number of documents in order to provide a comprehensive contextual understanding.

**Data Analysis Methods**

My approach to data analysis was informed primarily by Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist grounded theory rather than other grounded theory designs such as that of Glaser (2002), who suggested a highly structured objectivist grounded theory method, and Corbin and Strauss (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006), who offered built-in subjectivity within their methodological menu. A constructivist’s approach to grounded theory is loosely structured, offering reflexivity in analysis that accounts for the researcher’s theoretical knowledge and background throughout the constant analysis of particular grounded theory methods. A reflexive approach to analysis is called for—one that is flexible and constantly allows conclusions to stand as tentative guidelines for
identifying new data, and then directs data analysis toward the building of new theory. Flexibility is required for an empathetic understanding of a problem situation, placing great weight in understanding a range of viewpoints that value hidden meanings and relationships. Pre-defined data sources don’t always allow for the kind of meaning making that occurs in research that is exploratory in nature. Creswell (2007, p. 410) argued while there is no agreed upon structure for a qualitative design, beginning researchers often need a cookbook approach. As illustrated in Table 1, my approach to analysis primarily followed Charmaz’s suggestions and turned to the more structured protocol as the data or situation dictated.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative Data Analysis Map</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Identify qualified samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Observe/code blogging activities (4 month immersion) Review background information (primarily documents)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Conduct/code teacher interviews Code other documents Free writing (code saturation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Return analysis to participants Review themes against other data Analytical feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Organize and Assemble all collected documents Identify essential structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Theoretical testing Advising and Crosschecking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, the three broad sub-questions provided direction for the grounded theory analysis. While the issues of forcing the data (Kelle, 2005) are complex for
socially constructed grounded theory, sub-questions were necessary given the wide scope of any instructional activity. Moreover, an intention and goal orientation was foundational to this grounded theory generation with its emphasis on process (Charmaz, 2006). Sub-questions provided a common skeleton for considering key aspects of instructional activities, such as the learning goal (i.e., cognitive or task dimension), the relationship goal (i.e., social dimension), and the learning delivery systems (i.e., technological dimension). As a “common sense” framework, the three sub-questions provided guidance in data collection and analysis that otherwise would have been confusing (Kelle, 2005, n.p.). The sub-questions were the basis for semi-structured interviews, designed to gather the teachers’ holistic assessments of the activity.

Creswell (2007) described data collection and analysis in grounded theory as zigzagging between field and office (p. 65). The analytical process of identifying data, organizing insights, and then building categories is continuous throughout the various comparative methods that define grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). There are, however, a variety of alternative techniques for memo writing, sampling, coding, and categorizing data that are used in grounded theory analysis. What follows is a description of the methods, identification of the analysis techniques, and a clarification of the rationales that I used for this research study and illustrated in Table 1. It is important to note these strategies of analysis were not linear but iterative as I progressed toward theory development. For this process I also used Atlas.ti, a software program recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and designed for grounded theory research collection and analysis.
Memo Writing

Once I identified qualified samples, memo writing was essential as a way of first recording the ideas and eventually transforming those ideas into theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A continuous process throughout grounded theory analysis, memo writing disciplines the researcher to think about the data throughout the collection period. I used Atlas.ti software to distinguish four memo categories: codes, operations, methods, and theory. Although the general purpose of memo writing was to capture the researcher’s thinking in analysis, the categorical distinctions allowed my reflective writing activities to align with different phases of analysis as identified below:

1. Define each code or category by its analytic properties
2. Spell out and detail processes subsumed by the codes or categories
3. Make comparisons between and across data, codes, and categories
4. Bring raw data into the memo
5. Provide sufficient empirical evidence to support the category definition
6. Identify gaps in the analysis
7. Integrate a code or category by asking questions of it

My first analysis of code memos was simply reading through my thoughts while clarifying expressed ideas. Because memo writing is not intended for an audience rereading, deciphering the ideas by rewriting them and adding insights bolstered the process of reflexive thinking. I described these parenthetically as theory memos, and this type used memo writing as one analytical way to make theoretical connections between
the data and scholarship. Categories emerged in this process that helped me to organize the dimensional descriptions.

The formal process of memo writing focused the kind of decisions that guide the process of theorizing, which essentially starts from the very beginning, forges categories throughout the study, and continues until theory is built (Charmaz, 2006). The thoughtful process of memo writing guided me toward more data, from which more memos were generated. As the next section explains, memos were developed in conjunction with coding the data. Memo writing began shortly after I set foot into the online classroom, continued through coding of the final teacher interviews, and culminated with the building of theory.

**Coding**

Data coding was done in three phases, during which I systematically analyzed the data with the goal of making general ideas less abstract. During the first phase of initial coding, I highlighted the text on multiple runs with each sub-question in mind. Taking Creswell’s suggestion to minimize the number of codes to no more than 30 or 40 different categories, I focused analysis by limiting the number of codes. The highlighted text was categorized using action descriptors that were short and only one or two words, if possible. During initial coding key word indicators, in vivo codes, were identified that were clear cues for emotion or thinking. The descriptions and key word indicators were fully described in memos labeled *coding memos* to build descriptive characteristics while limiting codes. Key words were coded along the cognitive or task, social, and technological dimensions.
I then went back to the software program, Atlas.ti, to build a list of code names and emerging categories that established four or five dimensional themes. I looked for broad categories initially and then created subcategories based on emerging connections.

In the second phase, codes were compressed (or generalized) using software procedures that guided various levels of constant comparative analysis. During this phase and throughout this research, constant comparative methods sought similarities and differences within the codes among the categories created in phase one. These comparisons were also captured by the reflexive practice of memo writing. The final phase of coding involved the comparative analysis of memo writing previously described. Insights gained during memo writing that coincide with coding procedures is the ultimate purpose of a constant comparison method. Writing memos while coding identifies the intensity and impact within given moments of the conversational text. Again, coding and memo writing were not linear analytical phases. The emergent process of going back and forth between codes led to further adjustments within the focused coding technique and led to conceptualizing, then building, the categories of data.

**Theoretical Sampling**

Theoretical sampling methods were used to identify, collect, and continually analyze the data. Theoretical sampling refined and focused the emergent categories that arose during comparison with other categories (Charmaz, 2006). Memo writing directed theoretical sampling by identifying data areas with tentative ideas about the data, and then moving back and forth between data analysis and data collection as inquiry required. The method of theoretical sampling aligns with the logic of abduction. For instance, once
I began collecting data and creating memos, ideas emerged that led me toward the ongoing process of building categories and collecting more data. Theoretical sampling strategically pointed me to variants that helped me understand the phenomena. I saw, for instance, certain “hot topics” that directed me to focus on the nature of a particular kind of online conversation, and then compare dialogic variations across settings, especially where the conversations were more parochial. Theoretical sampling ensures that full and robust categories can be formed in relationships by building variation into the study.

Theoretical sampling ended when categories were saturated. Charmaz (2006) described saturation, as the point where fresh insights to theory are no longer required. The problem with applying any short explanation of theoretical sampling to analysis is that researchers often simply stop when patterns in the data repeat themselves. Repeating patterns may only explain trivial descriptions that surround superficial understandings to the research problem. Logical reasoning provides a better way of testing if the theory generated in qualitative research can be grounded in a sensible theoretical framework. If there is good probability that the theoretical claims of the theory hold up to a reasonable argumentation, then saturation has occurred. Colleagues and advisers can provide a good test of reasoning, and collegial support is essential in any qualitative research project. Furthermore, a constant review back to the literature that informed this study was essential in informing grounded theory and, as the next section maintains, was the final phase in preparing the research report. Theoretical sampling was the basis of theory generation, as the next section describes.
Completing Constant Comparative Analysis

What follows is a detailed explanation of methods used to analyze the descriptive data. Whereas the previous sections emphasized how data was collected, what follows is a fuller explanation of the reasoning behind my decisions leading to this study’s findings. Analysis was ongoing throughout this study and formalized by procedures moving systematically yet iteratively in six phases based on the map in Table 1. In each phase, I followed a structured decision-making process involving various methods of analysis primarily informed by literature on Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1989). I describe each phase so the reader is able to consider how this study led to a model and how that model was located within related deliberative theories.

In the first analytical phase, I identified participants and, in so doing, initiated the ongoing descriptive analysis that characterizes this study. The procedures of descriptive analysis were characterized earlier as initial coding and code-memos. As the teachers agreed to participate, I also began collecting background information about their schools and as much information as I could gather about their instructional activities. As I collected data from the selected teachers, I wrote operational memos that were used to consider key characteristics about the communities, schools, and assignments. Once they agreed to participate, most of the teachers then provided much of the background I needed in order to get a more complete contextual understanding of their blogging activities. In fact, many of the participants had written formally about their experiences, and two had a book awaiting publication. A contextual understanding of each
instructional activity was considered in conjunction with coding, categorizing, and descriptive memo writing. My analytical focus was determining how the teacher’s instructional rationale aligned to preliminary deliberative findings I identified on each of the blogs.

With the second analytical phase preparing for teacher interviews, I began the task of condensing categories into a more holistic understanding of each activity. Creswell (2007) maintained that pragmatic research relies less heavily on the student’s view of the situation and more often on teachers’ interpretations of student experiences. The analytical focus of semi-structured teacher interviews, as Creswell suggested, was directed toward interpreting the action of their students since the emphasis was on the activity. Again, a Grounded Theory approach to interviewing suggested that casual interviewing techniques should be used with open-ended questions and informal protocol (Wiersma & Jurs, 2004). With this in mind, I prepared for each teacher interview (scheduled in two-week intervals) and was ready to discuss the deliberative characteristics from their blogging conversations. When a particular insight or incident was discussed I was prepared to ask probing questions such as, “Why was a conversation particularly interactive or authentic?” or “Why were some comments marked, ‘removed by teacher’?” Interview questions allowed me to dig deeper to ask for points of clarification, and that is when insights were shared. Teachers in every case ended our conversation offering to answer any follow-up questions. Within two days of each meeting, I transcribed the interview and constructed a list of follow-up questions, sending those by e-mail.
In the third phase of analysis, I discovered emerging deliberative categories by looking within each activity and then across all cases. During this phase of analysis, Charmaz (2006) recommended getting a mental picture of the concepts, in a second level of analysis focusing on theory. Focus coding was done progressively through each blogging exercise as I identified significant and frequent terms and phrases. Focus coding, or analytical induction, occurred after initial coding to eliminate less useful codes and combine smaller categories into larger ones. As I completed each blogging activity I narrowed the list to 30 codes. Gaining insights during memo writing that coincided with coding procedures was the ultimate purpose of this constant comparison method. Writing memos while coding identified the intensity and impact within given moments of the conversational text. The emergent process of going back and forth between codes led to further adjustments within the focus coding technique and led to conceptualizing, then building the categories of data. By reorganizing relationships of data—by creating semantic networks of memos, codes, and codes collapsed into themes—a model began to emerge that had visible relationships to other deliberation models, but key differences as well.

During the fourth phase of analysis I received analytical feedback, using both peers and participants. In each case refining the descriptions, I applied Colaizzi’s (1978) approach that directs the investigator to return a description of the essential structure to research participants for evaluation as part of the final phase of analysis. Prior to this important check for misunderstandings or even simply for factual accuracy, I asked advisers to check for clear communication of ideas, and considerations of fairly
portraying evaluative judgments. This phase involved having two advisers look over my initial findings to consider issues such as shape, structure, and adequacy of descriptions. These shared perspectives were initiated prior to having some participants look over the process descriptions to get their interpretation. In this phase I returned the initial analysis to two teacher participants for review of emergent themes against other data.

During the fifth phase of analysis I constructed a descriptive model by employing axial coding procedures. The process first involved free writing, then comparing the data by way of data memos. Next, the data were “mind mapped” a process of collapsing prior codes. “A mind map is a diagram used to represent words, ideas, tasks, or other items linked to and arranged around a central key word or idea” (Sarker, Wallace, & Gill, 2008, p. 1). Atlas.ti software has mind-mapping functions that were used for storing, sorting, and analyzing the data and is described in more detail later in this section. Data from interview transcripts, artifacts, and blog postings were recorded based on assigned categories that were relevant to the information. Within these categories, information that emerged was rated based on quality and relevance using analytical procedures.

The sixth phase of analysis included setting up formal and informal meetings to determine if the model I created had explanatory power for others who also have considered and practiced a deliberative activity. Formally, this meant going to conferences and discussing key considerations. Informally, it meant getting feedback from teachers who have blogged and from one participant who agreed to look over the model. Verifying assumptions was also tentatively constructed, and that involved circling all research experiences: the data, reflections on past experiences, a reintegration
of past and present literature, and conversation with advisers, other scholars, and participants.

I generated theory that was tentative at all phases, however, by separating the first level of analysis that leans more toward generalizing descriptions (the focus of chapter 5) and the second that discusses those descriptions and draws conclusions (the focus of chapter 6). I allow readers to make their own sense of the data, in other words, to see how their experience might fit into the findings that resulted from this study. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) wrote:

When generation of theory is the aim . . . one is constantly alert to emergent perspectives that will change and help the development of theory. The published word is not the final one, but only a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory. (p. 40)

Within the six general phases and two levels of analysis, a tentative model for online deliberation was created.

Summary

This study marks the beginning of a line of inquiry motivated by the desire to develop more democratically productive communication practices online, an essential part of digital citizenship education. In this chapter I explained the purpose, research questions, researcher background, design, and philosophical and theoretical underpinnings. The tools and protocol for data collection and analysis were discussed in light of Charmaz’s (2006) Grounded Theory approach. A variety of coding methods
were described along with the constant comparative analysis that allowed themes to emerge from the data.

In the next chapter, I expound upon the context of this study. I present the findings in chapter 5 and discuss the implications for social studies education in chapter 6. In summary, by way of this dissertation study I have portrayed the experiences of high school students deliberating controversial issues in four online forums. This research may help to inform other social studies teachers interested in enhancing citizenship education via the Internet.
CHAPTER IV

CONTEXT

This research centered on the process of online deliberation in four high school social studies classrooms. In chapter 3, I explained the methodology that guided the research. To provide context for this study, I discuss in this chapter the schools, teachers, classes, assignment rationales, and technology behind the blogs—all of which will better ground the findings reported in chapter 5. The names of the schools, teachers, blogs, and students have been changed to maintain confidentiality. Table 2 provides a summary of the context. Online public reports yielded information about each school. The remaining contextual information came from teacher interviews and the blogs themselves. I immersed myself in the blogs three to four months before conducting guided interviews.

Table 2

Summary of Teacher Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Issues Blog</td>
<td>Steve &amp; Don</td>
<td>Washington High School</td>
<td>Affluent suburban school outside a major metropolitan center in the Midwest (11th grade American Studies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale: Authenticity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick’s Blog</td>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Roosevelt High School</td>
<td>Technology-rich suburban school in the South (11th grade American History)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale: Work Readiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim’s Class Wiki</td>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>Jackson High School</td>
<td>Small rural school in an eastern seaboard state (9th grade Advanced Global Studies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale: Constructivism &amp; Netiquette</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Issues Blog</td>
<td>Frank (w/ Drew)</td>
<td>Hoover High School</td>
<td>Affluent suburban school in the Midwest (12th Grade AP Government) paired with a large inner-city neighborhood school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale: Autonomy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
American Issues Blog

Washington High School

American Issues Blog took place at Washington High, a suburban public high school in the Midwest. Foremost, the community provides significant financial support for a public education. Public records show the district’s operating expenditure for 2009 was $19,415 per student as compared to the statewide average of $11,197. According to a state board of education report, the average teacher salary in the district for 2010 was $98,304 that year as compared to the statewide average of $63,296.

Located in a prosperous community, the school is high ranking in every category of the state board of education profile. The high school has a 99.4% graduation rate as compared to the state average of 87.8%. Only 3.4% of the student population at Washington High School is considered low income as compared with the state’s low-income population of 45.4%. Student academic achievement is high as measured by a regional examination, with the percent meeting or exceeding state standards last year in reading, math, and science at 89.6%, 89.8%, and 89.85%, respectively. This compares to the lower statewide averages of 54%, 52%, and 53.4%. Some 84.7% of the district’s students are White, with the next highest racial/ethnic group being Asian/Pacific Islander at 8%.

The Teachers, Steve and Don

The course is co-taught by Steve, a social studies teacher, and Don, an English teacher. After my initial meeting with Steve, he arranged for the three of us to talk so I might consider their differing perspectives about blogging (Steve, personal interview,
June 25, 2011). They both readily shared what they learned about blogging and their ideas about teaching. In our initial meeting, Steve told me he was on his way to a national teaching conference to present on fair use issues, and Don was completing a book on classroom blogging.

When all three of us talked, I found Steve and Don share many ideas about instruction. In much of their teaching, they emphasize social controversy and the desire to develop their students’ curiosity about social issues. Motivating their students to understand underlying causation into social issues is the reflective goal of their blogging. As Steve puts it, “there are not always two sides [to a story], so it is more important to get students to think carefully.” Developing careful consideration into a topic is a key strategy for these teachers. Steve explained, “Some of these kids are not used to reading long form. Sometimes they skip over certain things. Sometimes they write what they want to write as opposed to responding to something that is being directed at them.”

Steve, the social studies teacher, emphasized how online writing might improve students’ overall communication skills by making them listen more carefully to alternative perspectives and, in turn, making them think more deeply.

Primarily, I saw similarities in Steve’s and Don’s ideas about teaching methods, despite the expected differences in disciplinary perspectives. With a combined teaching experience of more than 40 years in their subject areas, they emphasized methods over content. Steve characterizes his use of “experimental” methods as being at the core of his teaching. Comparing their instructional choices to younger teachers who might be more “risk averse,” Steve describes his blogging goal is “to experiment a little bit . . . put an
image there or some sort of embedded object and make a commentary on that.” Steve teaches social studies, with the additional responsibility of leading faculty development in technology training. In his teaching, he integrates the two domains. After five years of blogging, the two teachers have learned a great deal about effective blog writing. Along with their students, both teachers engage in developing an understanding of what it means to blog, and both teachers have taken a keen interest in the communication revolution of our time.

Don, on the other hand, while not describing himself as a technology expert, understands the practical value of technology integration into his English instruction. He indicated how satisfying it has been to see how students recognize their own growth, as writers. As seen in quarterly reflective posts, students recognize how their writing evolves through blogging; it becomes more focused, more reader friendly, and as they “play with different font choices, audio and video links, and pictures to enhance what they are saying—more interesting” (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011). Students, even those who shy away from other forms of writing, enjoy writing on the blog, and most important to Don’s disciplinary aspirations is that students become better writers.

As collaborators in instruction, Steve and Don were modeling deliberative practices. Because instructional approaches vary between English and social studies, I asked both how they negotiated their differences in personality and in teaching styles. Steve responded that students often confused him for Don. He recalled several instances where students could not remember who provided instruction or whose view it was on an
issue, yet he pointed out the two teachers don’t think alike. Each has specific concerns about social change and students’ perceptions of their instruction rationales. Steve described Don’s philosophy as “more open ended” and then explained how choosing sides is less important than understanding causation (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011). Steve, on the other hand, told me he is more likely to ask students to take a stand, but he also emphasizes that any stand must be supported. As I discuss in detail later, I saw how they had distinctive approaches to questions.

I also observed during the blogging activities how blogging allowed Steve and Don to model common social concerns, the themes they identify each year when planning the course. They expected that a blogging activity would model how two teachers, with different perspectives, could authentically express their individuality. Likewise, they wanted their students to identify themselves within a world that extended well beyond the classroom. When others are listening, students can make a difference. Persuasive communication, which I saw on the blog as deliberative, was a central theme of their common teaching philosophies, the goals they set for the American Studies class, and an authentic blogging activity.

**Blogging in American Studies Class**

Steve’s and Don’s class integrates the social studies and English disciplines and is required of all juniors. On the district’s website, the school describes the American Studies curriculum as “a pairing of two survey courses taught side-by-side . . . A fully integrated instructional approach is the course’s goal.” The district established the team-teaching approach to “erase disciplinary distinctions” between English and social
studies and to “stress the inquiry-based philosophy of the course.” Inquiry-based learning seeks knowledge by questioning and, within this framework, the curriculum guide emphasizes that teachers’ instructional methods are “flexible.” Steve and Don organized Table 3

*The Range of the Conversations on American Issues Blog*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Replies</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White trash</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>May 2, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class stereotypes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Apr 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What democracy looks like</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>March 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching Wisconsin</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Feb 27, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom for thought we hate</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dec 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screw up a school</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Dec 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perilous Leaks?</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Dec 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth re: Thanksgiving?</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Nov 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited speech?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nov 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bumper stickers/free speech</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Oct 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning house</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Oct 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race Relationship</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Sept 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quran burning</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Sept 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another Labor Day</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sept 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing the conversation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sept 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground Zero</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Aug 22, 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* During the 2010-2011 school year, American Issues Blog comprised 16 conversations listed here in reverse chronological order that elicited from two to 17 comments or an average of 9.5 comments per conversation.
their course around a blogging activity, a unique inquiry approach from other teams.

Steve and Don organized the course thematically, changing the focus from year to year (Steve, personal interview, June 25, 2011). Their themes suggest controversy, as seen in last year’s topic selections (see Table 3) that give ideas for the class to blog about. Examples of last year’s themes include critical media literacy, civil liberties, and mythology. Topics within each theme include: media coverage of Reverend Jones burning the Koran, the Wiki leaks controversy over Julian Assange’s protected civil liberties, and the mythology that surrounds Thanksgiving.

While they have different approaches in discussing controversial issues, they both enjoy finding “edgy stuff” and “bouncing ideas” off one another (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011). The class is structured around understanding controversy, and I observed their particular emphasis on the media’s role in provoking conflict. The blogging activity is central to a conversation about, as Steve describes, “new ways others are shaping your world.” Their approach was to have students engage directly in a growing form of media they are critiquing—blogging.

Don hopes through blogging students will discover,

There are conversations going on without me. YES, people who are creating your world or making decisions about you and your future are in the midst of your conversations, and where would I go to hear them? Newspapers, online sources, other blogs. (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011)
Blogging allowed students not only to join the ongoing conversations, but to influence them as well. Both shared several incidents where students had made a difference through blogging, and I talk about one such incident in the next section.

**A Blogging Rationale of Authenticity**

The blogging rationale for the American Issues Blog is authenticity. Steve explained,

Don and I have always had this philosophy about being authentic. That they are doing the real work of English writers, the real work of historians, the real work of political bloggers, whatever you want to call them, as opposed to this kind of watered-down version [of a blog]. (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011)

Steve describes their blog posts “as mirrors that reflect American society” and an authentic blogging activity models what they want their students to achieve—a more critical view of culture. By using a critical eye to mirror bloggers outside the classroom, students learned first-hand what motivates blog readership. Direct experience inspired students to more carefully consider the medium and the growing cadre of blog readers. Steve emphasized how media analysis engages student interest. Also, he wanted his student blog posts to have impact. Students were encouraged to see themselves within the larger framework of American culture (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011). As Steve said, “The kids come to see themselves as an ongoing intellectual dialogue, with, not just people in the classroom” (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011).
In required reflective quarterly posts and through conversations in class, students were to consider the effectiveness and limitations of their blogging efforts. Authentic blogging is about extending the conversation and making new connections (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011). Through the authentic expressiveness that has popularized blog writing, students are empowered to connect their thinking for a social purpose. Steve and Don have found the process of authentic blogging makes current events relevant to the students. A blogger’s goal is to influence the conversation, and an authentic blogging activity invites comment and criticism from others, not only from students but also from the entire blogging community. According to the teachers, the conversation of this class extended because the American Issues Blog functioned as a hub for conversation between teachers and students, and as it developed, became popular on the web. The American Issues Blog models a connective purpose. Its readership extends to more than 100 countries from South Africa to Iran with a recorded 58,718 hits (page views) since June 2010.

Influence is motivating to students, according to Steve and Don who recounted several instances where students had a tangible social impact through blogging. They told of a case where one student continued posting well after the school year ended. She had over 8,000 readers on one post regarding her take on Amy Chua’s controversial book, “Tiger Mom.” Don described how the student was “raving” about her success, “how ‘I can’t believe,’ she was saying, ‘that people care what I have to say. I don’t believe my voice is being heard so much’” (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011).
Writing is essential to blogging, Steve and Don told me, and blog writing is unique as a genre. The teachers guided students on effective blog writing rather than focusing on technology training. Steve emphasized writing that builds an audience. Steve and Don not only talked about online writing in class, but they also demonstrated it through their own postings. They model, then discuss, important considerations such as topic selection and its relationship to potential online audiences. Students themselves reflected on their growth and mentioned key principles of writing for the web such as “less is more,” the need to focus on a particular issue, and the goal of being user-friendly. In short, these teachers advise their blogging students to be brief and relevant. Over the course of a year the teachers reported seeing improvement in students’ online writing abilities.

Along with their exhortations about authentic engagement, Steve and Don established their classroom blogging activity for its practical efficiencies. Blogging was an easier way to access journals of students’ reflective writing (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011). They saw online document handling as more efficient than carrying stacks of papers or worrying about losing them in various exchanges necessitated by co-teaching the class. An additional convenience was that journals readily could be shared online allowing both teachers to give feedback simultaneously. Journaling had been the central activity in the American Studies class, and now students could connect more easily with each other’s writing. Prior to blogging they would shuffle student work back and forth, always fearing something might get lost. Now less time is spent in document handling, which allows everyone more time to focus on the
writing itself, in particular, the clarity of writing (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011). Expression plays a central role in the American Issues Blog, so it was important that the writing process not be overshadowed by the technology and this consideration shaped the teachers’ choice of a blogging tool.

**Engaging Students With Blogger**

Both teachers expressed that their authentic blogging activity began with practical considerations. They chose to use a platform called Blogger because it was designed for users who have never blogged and allows users to create unique sites. As a Google application, Blogger makes it easy to set up a blog in just a few steps. With a Google account, beginners go to Blogger’s site and open their blog in one step. Designing the blog, the next step, is equally simple; it entails making basic choices about the layout of a blog. The entire look of a blog can change by choosing from many templates. With a template, the beginner does not have to learn usability issues with which web designers concern themselves. Backgrounds, layouts, colors, and fonts are preselected by design experts, and new bloggers are given hundreds of templates from which to choose. If desired, more experienced users can customize their backgrounds, layouts, colors, and fonts. After the user writes the first post, the so-called blog has then been created, and that involves little more than typing with a word processor. Even customization of a blog has become increasingly simple, and simplicity is Blogger’s focus.

Beyond creating the site, student bloggers are told by these teachers to consider their readers. Steve told me how he has investigated issues of design and discoverability, himself curious, and shares the technical knowledge he has learned with his class (Steve,
personal interview, June 25, 2011). Many factors play a role in attracting people to a blog, and Google design teams offer hundreds of templates that embed standard features of blogging, some of which new bloggers might be unaware. Optimizing searches, for instance, is a way to attract more people to the blog by influencing how high the site ranks when someone uses a search engine to conduct a keyword search. One example of search engine optimization is the way the code for a blog is written. Google provides templates so that a blog has a better chance of being found. I describe more of these utilities later in this section and how many students in Steve’s and Don’s class find and use them to enhance their individual blogs.

For the class as a whole, however, the teachers do not allow the technology to overshadow the learning. The first step when trying any new tool is to find out what is in the box, so getting all of the students started with the basic functions is the emphasis, as Steve explains:

We’re careful that we don’t overwhelm them with technology. All we care about is the writing. We start by modeling what Don and I are doing; we show them, ‘see how we linked here.’ And you know how Google will be much more likely to find your page the more links you have. And if you comment on other people’s blogs you will likely build an audience.

Steve’s idea is that students will naturally experiment, and it is this curiosity of the blogging functions that motivates his students to find out more about the potential, underscoring the inquiry emphasis of the course mentioned earlier (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011).
Some students figure out Blogger’s many features on their own along with new features they show the teachers. Students “play around with its many functions to experiment a little bit. Put a YouTube video in there. Put a song in there. Put an image there or some sort of embedded object in there and make a commentary on that.” Students explore and experiment within their own level of technology knowledge (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011). “You can emphasize some of the technology, the whiz bang stuff for some kids, the advanced kids. And you take those kids aside and you show them what can be done and then you have them teach their peers” (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011).

Steve found that students are motivated by the idea of attracting readers. The Google platform allows them to try blogging out of school and gives them the potential to expand their audiences beyond the high school walls. Blogger is an open platform, and like any website, it allows anyone with a computer and Internet connection to read the blog posts once they are published. This is in contrast with closed platforms, such as Facebook, a social networking tool; Edmodo, a social networking tool built specifically for educators; or Moodle, a course management tool. An array of alternatives provides many platforms for a teacher to open an online discussion. Unlike Blogger, however, many of the options are not open to viewing. When a teacher uses a closed platform to post a comment for discussion, the public does not automatically see what the teacher has posted. Instead, the reader must request permission to view the contents. A closed platform tool is designed to limit an audience.
Rather than controlling readership, an open platform tool like Blogger is designed for expanding an audience as I mentioned earlier. For instance, special widgets are designed to attract interest to the site. A software widget is a small application that can be installed and executed within a web page by an end user. Widgets represent a content area where bloggers can add media, links, text, and other tools. Don and Steve posted all of their students’ individual blogs using the common blogroll widget, which connects readers directly to those other blogs, thus allowing readers to identify with the blogger’s interest in other sites.

Functionally, these online gadgets add interest and interactivity such as the widget that Steve and Don included inviting visitors, with just a click of the mouse, to schedule a meeting with them. Such connectivity was evident, too, when students embedded a Facebook widget, which serves as an open invitation for readers to join their personal social network. Teachers and students used other widgets, such as YouTube, to direct readers with similar interests to favorite multimedia sources.

Finally, popularity matters. I observed on one student’s blog a widget to show the location of current visitors. Another student inserted a hit counter widget on his blog (see Figure 1), and the site’s popularity became an impetus for drawing more viewers. Likewise, the teachers and many students used a search tool to help readers navigate and identify relevant or favorite postings.

I found students building relationships on their blogs using a mix of widgets, each personalized thus adding to the authentic nature of the blogging activity. It was clear that students were using some of the functions and design tools modeled by Steve and Don.
Figure 1. Hit counters are one type of blog widget

For instance, like they saw Steve and Don do, students consistently used hyperlinks and multimedia to strengthen their arguments, provide supporting evidence, and stimulate critical thought and discussion—demonstrating special advantages of the open online forum. When looking through the student blogs linked to the American Issues Blog, I found that each student not only had created and customized the look of their blog, but also had found unique features to attract an audience. For example, one student used a survey tool on his blog to collect and respond to instant feedback from readers.

A reader first entering the American Issues Blog site, and then browsing through the blogroll to connected student blogs, would soon feel like they had entered a planned community where each property was of custom design, yet in compliance with a complimentary code. Hyperlink connections invited others browsing to explore, and walk into an open door, each marked by a student’s name, and to listen in on an insider’s conversation.
Nick’s Blog

Roosevelt High School

Nick’s Blog transpired at Roosevelt High, a technology-rich suburban school in a southern state. Roosevelt High School gives all of its students and its staff laptop computers, the result of a district-wide partnership with Apple Computer and Dell. The importance of this initiative is reflected in the high school’s mission statement that reads, “All students will reach their potential through differentiated instruction, innovative practice, and the effective use of technology.” The influence of a technology-driven mission is seen in other ways. Notably, the high school houses a program that prepares students for higher education in related fields of computer science and information technology. Roosevelt High School prominently places its technology initiatives on its website, along with a list of academic successes that include ranking high nationally in academic achievement. The school’s academic success is also indicated by its high pass rates on the state’s achievement test in 2011, which were approximately 99% for English, 99% for mathematics, 100% for history, and 99% for science, as compared to statewide averages of 88%, 87%, 84% and 90%, respectively (National Center for Educational Statistics). The district achieves these goals at spending levels that are slightly below the state average. The district spent $9,768 per student for 2008, which placed the school in the second quintile nationwide. The school comprises a student population that is 80% White, 10% Asian, 5% African American, and 5% Hispanic and other.
The Teacher, Nick

From my initial conversation with Nick (Nick, phone interview, June 9, 2011), I discovered that he taught social studies classes for 12 years in subjects that include AP government, U.S. government, U.S. history, English as a Second Language, and world history. I later discovered he has a bachelor’s degree in political science with a minor in international studies, along with a master’s degree in education (Nick, phone interview, June 22, 2011). He serves on school committees that plan for technology, and he is a strong advocate for the school’s technology mission. The school encourages innovative instruction and recognized Nick as an innovator. Last year he earned a district-wide award for an online lesson plan. The award is based on exemplary lesson plans, using a blogging activity, that modeled teaching 21st century skills, which as we see later, defines Nick’s primary blogging rationale.

When we first talked, Nick suggested I read his ideas on school reform posted on a statewide school reform blog. I found he contributes regularly, often writing on technology issues. He advocates with other reform-minded educators to integrate technology in active collaborations, primarily on blogs. In his essays, he communicates a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the current direction of the educational system. In particular, he voices his concern about mandated content testing. Nick writes critically about the state of education, which we discussed in our interview. He restated that mandatory testing was a constant distraction from what he would otherwise emphasize—teaching technology skills (Nick, phone interview, June 22, 2011).
Nick writes about how blogging might empower democratic teaching, yet he does not publicize his writing on the statewide school reform blog to his students or to his administrators. Rather, by blogging he is able to publicly address educational reform issues while avoiding the inevitable conflict that might ensue from a more direct dialogue with his principal. Based on previous administrator reactions of “expressed uncertainty,” Nick believes his ideas about education and instructional freedom are controversial and this influences his teaching. After reading many of his posts, I found that he writes in a topic-oriented manner rather than writing about his school directly. I asked him about how he negotiated views that conflict with administrative policies. He said he does not believe the school’s administration is aware of his reform blogging and prefers it to remain that way (Nick, phone interview, June 22, 2011).

Nick does, however, share his philosophy on school reform with other educators, including some individuals within his school (Nick, phone interview, June 22, 2011). His message is one of instructional empowerment. He believes that technology integration requires more than access, it also requires critical thinking. As I found, he himself is critical, particularly of school policies that work against the technology ideas they seek to promote. He challenges teachers to use technology tools, such as blogs, Twitter, and social networks in more practical ways, rather than by simply meeting academic mandates, or not using technology at all. In this way, he believes teachers will better promote a common cause of democratic school reform.
Blogging in American History Class

For this study, I focused on the post Nick used in his 11th grade American history course. Although he has used blogging for all of his classes, last year his blog was geared mostly toward conversations about American history controversies. Nick explained that his classroom blog was “a place for information dissemination, debate, and additional resources for his students” (Nick, phone interview, June 22, 2011). For instance, he used the blogging activity to inform students about controversial topics such as the recent health care reform law. His blog presented an effective delivery system for historical content, but also was the basis for social networking analysis as I explain in the next section. Interspersed with the class conversation are blog posts from the teacher that do not invite comment but serve more to disseminate information.

Nick tied historical controversies to topical discussions that students might find relevant. The range of conversations indicates how historical conversations were often tied to current events (see Table 4). By asking his students, “What attack on America was worst in US History?” Nick presented students with choices, the attack of the Maine or more recent attacks. Regularly, students were to speculate on alternative paths of historical events. One example is when he asked students, “What if Lincoln had not Died?” This prompt opened the door for conversation about the current topics of states’ rights and race relationships. Likewise, Nick designed many counter-factual questions specifically to give a historical debate currency, while at the same time covering content standards. Particularly late in the year, questions were related to current events, such as “[What] If Bush Hadn’t Invaded [Iraq]?” I saw how blogging was
Table 4

*The Range of the Conversations on Nick’s Blog*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Replies</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If Bush Hadn’t Invaded</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>May 14, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Al Qaeda had succeeded</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>May 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Al Gore won?</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>May 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Reagan was assassinated?</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>May 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Nazis nuked NYC?</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Mar 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Japan didn’t surrender?</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Mar 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Nazis defeated Soviets?</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Mar 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If no New Deal?</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Mar 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive President was best?</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Feb 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If USS Main had not exploded?</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Feb 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causes of the Civil War</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Jan 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causes of the Civil War</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Jan 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causes of the Civil War</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Jan 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causes of the Civil War</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Jan 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nullification</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Jan 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What if Lincoln had not Died?</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Jan 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickett’s Charge</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Dec 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If gold never discovered?</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Nov 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson v Nullifiers</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Nov 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Attack on America was worst in US History?</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Oct 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Founders Quiz/Better Blogging</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Oct 20</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*(table continues)*
Table 4 (continued)

The Range of the Conversations on Nick’s Blog

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Replies</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What if French didn’t help?</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Oct 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformation Leaders</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>Oct 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolutionary Images</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Oct 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democratic Values</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Sept 28</td>
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<td>Blogging Rubric</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sept 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back to School Night</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sept 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Study America’s Past</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Aug 17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. During the 2010-2011 school year, Nick’s Blog comprised 26 conversations listed here in reverse chronological order. These blogs elicited from 21 to 177 comments. Questions often followed a “what if” line of inquiry.

Nick emphasized his blogging activity was designed to prepare students for the 21st century workforce. He anticipated technology instruction was time consuming but believes building “21st century communication skills” is essential (Nick, phone interview, June 22, 2011). Nick’s ideas were that in classroom blogging students are given a public forum where their comments are well-written and well-reasoned. He considered that future employers will expect effective online communicators, yet student skills in that area are not measured in the formal curriculum. Nick was critical of the current reform
movement that underemphasizes practical skill-building thereby missing the opportunity afforded to a school where every student has a laptop.

Constrained by time, Nick said administrative mandates too often conflicted with his teaching commitments. He explained, “If my scores are lower because I spent two weeks on a project, and you looked at test scores, not necessarily your kids’ technology competencies, it kind of hurts me.” In Nick’s advocacy for building technology skills, a position opposing unrelated but mandatory testing, he argued administrative pressures “send a mixed message.” He expressed the external pressure of top-down compliance:

That’s one of the challenges this year . . . making sure that when I do one of these big [blogging] projects . . . that I don’t fall too far behind the instructional pacing guide; making sure that they also get the content along with the technology.

He found the administrative constraints limiting and frustrating.

Rather than settling for passive listening among students, Nick envisioned students actively seeking historical insights through relevant blogging conversations. His blog provided a break from the mandated American history curriculum and emphasized media literacy in ways that might make history more relevant for students. Nick told me of one such instance when, after he posted on the actual provisions of the law, a classroom discussion ensued about various sources of news information on the topic. He said students were surprised to learn how they were so misinformed about the law’s provisions from family, friends, or media. He was able to show students clips from Fox News and from MSNBC, and he felt he provided a better idea of media biases within
various sources of misinformation. In class, he instructed his students to listen carefully and to critically evaluate media messages on other topics as well.

Online, I observed Nick using the deliberative format of a blog, and the blog’s discussion features naturally aligned with his critical pedagogy. Because Nick believed, as did Steve and Don, that media reports distort students’ understanding of issues, blogging activities were created as a prescriptive solution to “media misinformation.” For example, students might connect the present day Tea Party movement to its historical origins and discuss political nuances and influence.

Nick not only designed topical conversations to draw students’ interest, but he also used a blogging platform for collaborative projects. His blogging rationale was interactivity, which he believes is a key workforce factor. By encouraging students to exchange cell phone numbers, blog about significant ideas, and cooperate in project assignments, his aim was building their sense of community, collaboration that he says is demanded in the 21st century workplace. Nick strategically emphasized student interactivity to awaken both curiosity and motivation; however, not without a grade. As a practical planner, he also considered grading a motivational necessity particularly in a success-driven school. Since Nick used the blog for multiple purposes, he needed a flexible platform and a tool that was not complicated to operate.

**Skills-Building Blogging With WordPress**

Because Nick preferred the complexity of an open discussion, he used WordPress.com for his blogging activities. As an open-source tool particularly designed for blogging, WordPress.com (which I refer to as WordPress) offers a platform that is
both changeable and efficient (Nick, phone interview, June 22, 2011). It has flexible
design features and gives the blog owner control over design, content, and commenting.
WordPress, for all of its features, is relatively intuitive for those new to blogging.

Using WordPress allowed both parents and students electronic access to Nick’s
instructional plans. WordPress offers free blogs, and once a member, you have easier
access to other member blogs. WordPress has a common database of all its members
making users easier to find. Nick believed his platform should be open to all readers,
especially parents.

Embracing accountability, Nick shared his online activities and instructional
strategies with parents. WordPress, like many blogging platforms, has interactive tools.
He wanted parents to see his lectures and student outcomes, including student projects
and online conversations. On his blog, he includes a daily agenda and, for individual
student view, grades that are posted regularly. Nick posted a syllabus online along with
grading rubrics thereby communicating his expectations to parents. Materials were
always accessible to everyone. To this end, Nick included an e-mail link and maintained
a Twitter account that provided easy public access by way of WordPress widgets posted
on his blog. By being included, parents might consider how lessons were conceived and
how their students performed. As a result, parents might better engage in their child’s
online learning and, if confused, they were just one click away from Nick’s rationale.

Foremost, Nick modeled emerging 21st century skills through blogging. He
integrated new instructional technologies including Google waves, Google apps, and
Google docs—tools that he used in collaborative projects. With WordPress accounts,
students could easily share their projects online. His approach to teaching was integrative, using many technologies. WordPress served as the hub of all his activities. While collaborating and creating content online to build workforce preparedness, he focused on blogging to improve student communication (Nick, phone interview, June 22, 2011).

**Tim’s Class Wiki**

**Jackson High School**

Tim’s Class Wiki was developed at Jackson High School situated in a small rural town (population about 9,000) in an eastern seaboard state. A wiki is an online collaborative platform used for content creation and that allows any user to add and edit content. It is on his class wiki that Tim has created and maintains a class blog.

As described by Tim, the families in this town are “working class” and “generally conservative” (Tim, personal interview, June 15, 2011). The most recent U.S. census reports a median household income of $46,000.

The high school serves 476 students: 362 White, eight Hispanic, four African American, and four other. In 2009-10 the community spent about $14,000 per student, just over the state average in per-student spending. In 2011, pass rates for the 10th grade proficiency test were 74% for math, 76.9% for science, and 75.9% for reading as compared with statewide passing averages of 80.3%, 81.7%, and 81.8%, respectively.

The state’s Department of Education (DOE) reported the school was below the statewide averages on several measures including averages in graduation rates, percentage of students taking the SAT, and scores on the SAT in math, critical reading,
and writing. The state’s DOE also collected information on *Homework Information available to parents online* and found the school is slightly below average in this newly reported category. The state’s DOE website stated that many reporting changes were in progress, according to a statement by the interim education commissioner. The most recent School District Report Cards on Jackson High School were over two years old, which explained some of the confusion between Tim and his administrator in complying with standards. I discuss how Tim’s Wiki activity attempted to meet accountability standards in an upcoming section. Like many other districts across the country, Jackson High School was operating within a state education system that is in flux and trying to catch up with accountability standards and reporting.

**The Teacher, Tim**

Before asking prepared questions, I found out more about Tim when we first met in person. He had just finished his fifth year of teaching and was in the midst of changing schools. He graduated from a nationally recognized eastern school and currently was pursuing an online master’s degree studying technology education. As a political organizer, Tim also canvassed for the Obama campaign and has considered the idea of entering politics. All of his past experiences emphasized an early and continuing interest in politics. He maintains strong viewpoints about his own civic engagement that he models for his students.

I also discovered we shared a common experience. While he was in high school, Tim participated in the Center for Civic Education’s program, “We the People” (WTP), a program that I employed in my classroom. Tim shared his enthusiasm for WTP as we
discussed its deliberative merits. The program applies deliberative practices it calls simulated congressional hearings in a student competition. A panel of students presents 4-minute cases before expert judges on Constitutional topics of controversy. In this mock hearing students are evaluated on their presentations and the defense of their answers. Tim competed in WTP competitions as a high school student. Recognizing the value of the program to his own education, Tim organized and advised WTP at Jackson High. In part, his Class Wiki was designed to prepare students for the deliberative competition, a function we both agreed was missing from the Center for Civic Education’s website.

Tim described himself as one who teaches against the grain in a conservative district. While Tim does not hide his political views from students, he does make it a point to argue all sides of an issue declaring himself a “devil’s advocate.” He described the principal, whom he respects as an administrator, as more conservative and as someone who wanted a more “sterilized” civics education curriculum. Outside of the classroom the two engage in political discussions, and Tim sometimes gets the message to tone down the controversy in the classroom. However, Tim believes the social studies classroom is the appropriate place to discuss controversial issues because he believes the merits of all arguments should be presented. Otherwise, he says, it “defeats the purpose of education” (Tim, personal interview, June 15, 2011).

**Blogging in Honors Global Studies Class**

Over the past four years, Tim has taught several social studies classes including ninth grade Advanced Global Studies (AGS) and used his Class Wiki to extend his classes.
During the personal interview Tim told me his Class Wiki is a “valuable resource to check the course calendar and download class documents” related to his instructional activities in all classes (Tim, personal interview, June 15, 2011). *Hot Topics* was where students in all of Tim’s classes discussed controversial issues. It was the area labeled *Hot Topics* that initially caught my attention, forums that Tim used specifically for blogging about controversial discussions. Last year *Hot Topics* discussions that were used in his AGS class are identified in Table 5. Tim’s Wiki had other forums as well including Political Satire, AP U.S. History, and We the People, yet I focused on these AGS class conversations (See Figure 2). I wanted to see how the same students within one class were learning to comment at different points in the semester.

*Hot Topics* was just one forum that is situated on his high school social studies Class Wiki to extend his classroom. Tim introduces *Hot Topics* on his syllabus as “a weekly online discussion of issues.” During the 2010-2011 school year, *Hot Topics* comprised nine conversations that elicited from 13-84 comments or an average of 27 comments per conversation. Topics ranged from domestic to foreign issues and touched on media bias,

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*Figure 2.* Tim’s Wiki has one area particularly dedicated for discussion.
economy, religion/culture, State of the Union address, voting, and sustainability/consumerism. Although all conversations on Hot Topics were examined for this study, several conversations related to the AGS class were analyzed more closely.

Table 5

*The Range of the Conversations on Tim’s Class Wiki*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Replies</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voting Trends &amp; Statistics</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>May 15, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State of the Union Analysis</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>April 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westboro Decision</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>April 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>April 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story of Stuff*</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>March 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget Appropriations Simulation</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>March 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propaganda</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>March 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective vs. Biased Media*</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>March 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Cultural Center*</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>Sept. 9, 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Nick introduces Hot Topics on his syllabus as a weekly online discussion of issues. Those conversations are listed here in reverse chronological order and those marked with an asterisk identify conversations analyzed relating to the AGS class.

Two conversations under the microscope addressed the controversy over a Muslim cultural center being built near the World Trade Center site in New York City and “The Story of Stuff.” The former discussion on Hot Topics extended from Sept. 6-9 and included 84 comments averaging 62 words per comment over the two days.

According to the AGS syllabus:
The course will take a look at some of the major events and developments that have occurred, or are still developing, around the globe. We will also explore various regions, particularly their economic systems, governments, technological advances, environmental impacts, and cultural traditions. Due to globalization, modern technology, and the overall development of the new world economy, it is vital that we also carefully explore the issues emerging from an increasingly interconnected human population.

As indicated in what he wanted parents to appreciate, the wiki was a space where Tim and his students extended learning outside the classroom.

**A Blogging Rationale of Constructivism**

Tim created his site using a wiki, primarily as a tool for content creation, but also because of its built-in commenting functions. Across various ninth and 10th grade courses, Tim’s Class Wiki organized his course materials, broadcast his student work, and provided his classes with discussion spaces. Tim told me his Class Wiki is a “valuable resource to check the course calendar and download class documents” related to his instructional activities in all classes but found the flexibility of a wiki inspired other possibilities (Tim, personal interview, June 15, 2011). He wanted his students, not only to have access to class content, but to discuss what they found.

I do enough talking in class and I think that forum lets them be a little more comfortable. You may notice if you go through, I don’t comment too much within the discussion . . . I really wanted that to be their time to talk. (Tim, personal interview, June 15, 2011)
He identified the value of a student discussion in developing his wiki for We the People. Faced with a practical problem, Tim’s discussion activities started when his WTP students desired an in-depth understanding of Constitutional principles. While there are many organizational websites providing complex philosophical summaries to basic political conceptions, Tim’s students needed to sort through a wide range of understandings. Whereas content driven websites lacked interactivity, Tim recognized this omission when he participated in We the People competitions preparing for congressional hearings. The Center for Civic Education’s WTP competitive hearings are adjudicated by constitutional experts from the legal and academic communities; so Tim had to be prepared, and now, so did his students. Yet some years later, the Center for Civic Education website, primarily an information source, still lacked a student forum for case discussions. Now as the WTP adviser, Tim better understood his students’ desire to jointly prepare their cases. Tim designed his Class Wiki to allow for content creation and discussion.

As he continued developing the Class Wiki, he found it was a flexible Internet tool that facilitated other class-related instructional goals. Tim told me that after having lived through the emergence of the Internet, he found a wiki offered the most effective combination for content sharing, content creation, and interactivity. As he had experienced preparing for We The People competitions, Tim found the Wiki to be an effective content-sharing tool that allowed participants to refine their arguments through an online deliberation.
Developing Netiquette With Wikispaces

Tim wanted a tool that allowed multiple users to simultaneously edit documents and to talk about them. “I was trying to make that website into a forum,” and Wikispaces provided an effective solution (Tim, personal interview, June 15, 2011). Furthermore, he appreciated how users may also upload and embed multimedia while commenting on their revisions. All work is archived on Wikispaces, so users can see and rethink their progressive content creations. For teachers as well as students, Tim stated, this is an important evaluative function.

Wikispaces describes its forums to educators as “free and ad-free, and you can make them private for extra security for your students K-12. Wikis also come with a User Creator tool that lets you open student accounts in bulk—without student e-mail addresses” (www.wikispaces.com). All of Tim’s students had Wikispaces accounts that allowed him to keep track of their comments. Because of its intuitive posting and editing functions, he chose Wikispaces as a flexible platform allowing intuitive content creation. Tim appreciated its simplicity stating, “The students don’t have to know programming. They can create pages pretty simply. They can revert back to things they have done to see who did the changes and what time. They can see who did exactly what change” (Tim, personal interview, June 15, 2011), which he said helps.

Students also could post the actual media, not just the links, within their comments. For example, I saw how students uploaded pictures within their comment fields for group consideration. This feature was useful when students wanted a reader to visualize an idea in their comment without distracting them to a linked website.
Wikispaces offered many advantages for content creation, but it does not provide spellcheck and some other writing functions like those found on WordPress, Blogger, and other tools specifically designed for blogging.

Like other discussion tools in this study, Wikispaces allows networking and an open dialogue; however, Tim chose this platform for its control features allowing him to monitor inappropriate discussions. He described his concern. “I wouldn’t want my students and everything they put on Facebook available to anyone in the group. So as long as you can make it secure where they could communicate online but not necessarily see each other’s profile.” More specifically he explained how a wiki brings online behaviors to his attention:

Sometimes I have to go back and delete. That’s why, I try not to censor it really, if someone writes something that’s a little over the top, I won’t censor it. If someone has a verbal attack at somebody then I will delete it. Just because I feel like that could turn into a conflict. You know we have had a lot of bullying online. (Tim, personal interview, June 15, 2011)

By default, Wikispaces e-mails the teacher with any site additions, including comments. Tim’s decision to use Wikispaces was influenced by his ability to control the discussion, which he believed required some technological mediation.

**Current Issues Blog**

**Hoover High School**

Current Issues Blog took place at Hoover High, a public suburban school in the Midwest that serves some 1,800 students in grades 9-12 and was named by a prominent
publication as one of the top 75 schools in the nation. As of 2005, the school district had an 11.9 to 1 student-teacher ratio. The school is somewhat diverse with an ethnic population of 67.5% White non-Hispanic, 14.6% African American non-Hispanic, 13.2% Asian or Pacific Islander, 3.5% Multi-Racial, and 1.2% Hispanic. Some 9.2% of the student population is economically disadvantaged, and 9.5% of students have disabilities. Hoover High graduates 98% of its students, and of those graduates 98% attend college. By the standard measurement of the state’s graduation test, Hoover High School excels with students scoring 99.1% for reading, 98.5%, for math, 98.5% for writing, 98.3% for science, and 99.1%, for social studies—higher than the statewide averages of 92.4%, 89.1%, 93.4%, 84.2%, and 88.0%, respectively.

Located in an affluent suburban city outside of a major metropolitan area, the city’s population is just over 23,000 and has been cited among the “Best Places to Live.” The median family income for 2009 was just over $115,000 (factfinder.census.gov).

**The Teacher, Frank**

I learned during a personal interview, Frank has 15 years of teaching experience, more than 10 of those with his current district. Frank summed up what he values most in teaching social studies this way: “I love that complexity. I love it.” As our discussion continued, he spoke openly about both the possibilities and the barriers of blogging about controversial issues:

I love that whole concept of muddying the water . . . you should seek out complexity when there are issues. With the standards from the [state mandated
tests], seek out the right answers. Good teaching isn’t taking the complex and making it simple. (Frank, personal interview, July 21, 2011)

He further explained why he brings controversial issues into classroom discussions:

I am going to do it because I think it makes you a more productive citizen in our democracy—that we need to discuss these issues. There is no right or wrong. When I am on the debate on abortion, my god, I will not interject myself to say, “This is it.” I won’t. My kids make some very very profound arguments where, like, this is great. It’s simple, but those open-ended questions, like on the blog [allow for complex discussions]. Life isn’t AM radio; I can’t listen to Glenn Beck and Michele Bachmann telling me what I’m supposed to think. That infuriates me. We dummy down society. The answers are not that simple on either side, left or right. We [educators] should introduce that complexity. (Frank, personal interview, July 21, 2011)

In words and tone, Frank conveyed his passion for democratic reasoning instilled through democratic teaching. Blogging has provided him the wiggle room to have these kinds of discussions with students, whereas the required curriculum for an AP world history class and the mandates of an accountability-driven district might not otherwise allow time or resources for such depth and breadth of discussion. The community’s educational emphasis is on academic achievement and “standards-based” goals, and Frank discussed the resultant stress placed on his school (Frank, personal interview, July 21, 2011).
This is the second time Frank has collaborated on a blogging assignment, having previously done a classroom blogging activity with another teacher in the same state. He decided again to include a blogging partner, this time with Drew, a former student who was now teaching in New York City. Frank described his friend and former student, 10 years his junior, as “a very very bright kid who graduated at the top of his class in education” and then went on to earn a prestigious scholarship. After graduating, Drew got a teaching job in the Bronx where he teaches a 10th grade class. Frank described Drew as a very good teacher, who could have taught anywhere, but instead chose one of the most challenging assignments. Frank shared how he contacted Drew, “We had openings at Hoover High School that I called the kid about, and he said, ‘No thanks. I don’t want any part of that.’ That’s just who he is” (Frank, personal interview, July 21, 2011). Frank continued to describe Drew’s missionary zeal, and I got the idea Drew was a teacher who had a calling to help underprivileged kids.

**Blogging in AP Government Class**

Frank teaches 12th grade AP government and used the blogging activity to engage students outside of the classroom and class period in an extended conversation about immigration. He described the students of his teaching partner as “low income . . ., predominately Latino, a lot of second language kids, high rates of violence.” Drew loves the work, Frank said, but finds it incredibly challenging. He described his own students: “Our kids tend to be liberal as a whole. We have conservative kids, but mostly liberal and very open” (Frank, personal interview, July 21, 2011). This was the only blog under
study that directly invited participants from another school, an approach that speaks to Frank’s blogging rationale.

**A Blogging Rationale of Autonomy**

Frank’s Current Issues Blog entailed a month-long conversation between two disparate high schools on a single controversial topic (see Table 6), the problems surrounding current U.S. immigration policy. Frank’s blog was starkly different than the previous three blogging activities, where the intent was for students to discuss a different topic weekly or even more frequently. In fact, the American Issues blogging activity discussed at the beginning of this chapter allowed students to take part in deciding what to talk about and when by virtue of their individual blogs. Frank’s distinct approach to the blogging activity was mirrored in his blogging rationale.

Table 6

*The Range of the Conversation on Current Issues Blog*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Replies</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imperialism and the US</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Nov 26, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration in America</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>Aug 29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Current Issues Blog is an online discussion forum between social studies students in two high schools.

Of all the blogging activities, this one appeared to include the greatest diversity of perspectives. Although Frank’s class was largely homogenous in terms of socioeconomic status, the students from the inner-city school viewed the issue of immigration through vastly different lenses. In addition to being from low income families, many are
themselves undocumented or have parents who are undocumented, according to Frank. “So, that’s what we wanted to exploit. [That’s the perspective] we wanted to bring into the conversation.” At the time of the blogging activity, the controversy of immigration policy was a “hot topic” (Frank, personal interview, July 21, 2011).

The deliberative process itself was a driving force behind Frank’s blogging rationale as he explained to me,

You are going to be writing, you are going to be critically thinking and you are going to be putting thoughts together. And that is a very very important skill, and I don’t give a shit what content area you are going to, it might help you. I am going to do it because I think it makes you a more productive citizen in our democracy. That we need to discuss these issues. (Frank, personal interview, July 21, 2011)

In part, Frank’s motivation was that new ways of communicating could bring into the conversation students who normally would not engage. He explained:

If they talk in class, they are going to talk more on a blog. The nice thing about that blog is in any class of 30 you get two or three kids that normally don’t speak, and they’re going to write. There you go—I’m going to meet them halfway. Likewise, the blog prompt openly invited students to discuss other topic-related ideas.

The bottom line in Frank’s blogging activity was that he was highly motivated to develop autonomy in students. In this case, autonomy translated into enhancing student skills and abilities of deliberation from simply joining in the discussion to developing critical thinking skills. Frank talked about these motives, “We are talking about politics
just as if you were at a dinner table or at a diner with your friends. That’s the way we want it to be.” Frank’s blogging rationale included a desire that individuals develop the wherewithal to be able to formulate informed opinions and to be willing and able to stand up for their “core ideas” (Frank, personal interview, July 21, 2011). A focus on autonomy and critical thinking skills motivated Frank to change from the school’s blogging tool to a public platform.

**Autonomous Blogging With WordPress**

Previously, Frank said he used the school’s content management system for his student blogging activities. However, once he began collaborating with other schools, he needed to switch to a public platform and at that time selected WordPress.com (referred to as WordPress). Frank said his blogging focused on student participation and so he valued utility. WordPress provided an easy-to-use effective tool, as previously described. An advantage of WordPress is that it looks like an authentic blog, unlike the school’s more generic blogging tool. Yet Frank does not utilize features for publicity highlighted in previous cases such as the built-in promotional widgets (e.g., hit counters, blogrolls, analytics). Frank’s blogging aim is more focused. He wants to extend the classroom conversation, get his students to write and, in so doing, get students to think more critically. Because of Frank’s WordPress choice, inner-city students from New York City seamlessly entered into online conversations with suburban students from the Midwest.

For extending the conversation, the blogging feature that Frank most appreciated was its free and open platform which, as he says, aligns with his blogging philosophy.
He told me he likes “leaving it open to where they can really have at it.” Frank embraces the idea of openness in terms of access to the technology and to the blog as well as ability to influence the direction of the conversation. “I want to keep focused,” Frank told me, “I want to keep them on the topic because writing off the topic [will] hurt them on [standardized] tests [or essays].” But keeping students on topic is “impossible when at . . . midnight or one in the morning, rather than Facebooking or rather than watching TV, rather than looking up porn, rather than looking up God knows what, you are talking about social studies.”

A public platform such as WordPress has other advantages. Frank expressed his enthusiasm that blogging might capture a student’s imagination more than a traditional classroom lecture and sometimes more than other digital temptations. He said some students are motivated by the excitement of being heard. The public stage of WordPress adds to this feeling. Frank’s experience with blogging is that it facilitates a welcoming student-to-student conversation as opposed to a teacher-centered discussion. He explains:

I want them to talk . . . That is a large part of the blogging process whereas, a lot of times kids that don’t speak in your class—they will gravitate toward the blog. Blogging is egalitarianism. [When blogging, students think] “I’m equal. I have a keyboard right in front of me, just like you do, and I’m going to say my mind. You can’t interrupt me.” So I like that fact. (Frank, personal interview, July 21, 2011)
Frank showed his passion for the spoken word and said, after many years of integrating blogging into his teaching, he came to believe the written word evokes similar passion in his quieter students.

Still, even so-called open sources such as WordPress are not open to all. The flexibility of collaborative writing at home or during class time was easy at an affluent school, yet not always possible for Drew and his students. Frank recounted his blogging partner’s predicament:

He would have to have lab time set up as part of his instruction time where he had to give up to do this, where now we are going to go in front of the computers. I can’t send a kid from the Bronx, a first-generation kid from El Salvador or Puerto Rico to go say “Hey go use your parents’ computer.” [The student would likely respond] “We don’t have a computer.” You know, we’ll go to the library and use the computer. “Well we don’t have a library,” or “I’m not going to go to the library in my free time.”

Frank said the blogging activity with the New York students will serve as a learning experience for future collaboration.

**Summary**

The stories of Frank, Tim, Nick, Steve, and Don provide a glimpse into the nature of social studies blogging going on in some of today’s high schools. Among all of the teachers I saw a pronounced interest in technology and in the role that social studies plays in democracy and citizenship. These teachers were not averse to risk taking in the face of real or perceived administrative pressures. In this chapter I have elaborated in great
detail about the schools, teachers, blogs, and students under study. Providing such an in-depth profile of the learning setting aligns with my belief that learning is contextual. With contextual considerations in mind, I found the nature of an online deliberation varied, not only between blogs, but within each blogging activity.

Additional insights into these blogging activities are presented in the next chapter, where I go beyond the context and discuss the data and key findings especially in terms of the process and how these instructional practices transpired.
CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

The Internet has become the modern-day public square, where issues are debated and sometimes decided. Thus the need for digital citizenship research such as this presents itself to the 21st century social studies educator. The goal of this study was to describe the nature of deliberation on the Internet in a high school setting. The previous chapter provided descriptions for four high school social studies blogs under study. In this chapter I present the findings, three themes, and a draft model that emerged during intensive constant comparative analysis as detailed in chapter 3. Initial coding of the data and reflexive memo writing preceded guided interviews. For three to four months prior to meeting with the teachers, I observed the blogging activities and immersed myself in the blogging data. The findings suggest pragmatic solutions for educators and add to the literature of deliberative democracy collectively pointing toward a concept of deliberation that is evolving into hybrid online deliberative activities.

In the first three sections of this chapter, I explain the key themes that emerged, and in the final section I present a model of online deliberation. Because of the interdependent nature of the categories, I illustrate conversations that led to development of the themes in each section, but many carry over to other sections since the cognitive or task dimension, social dynamics, and technological aspects are not discrete phenomena in the educational experience. I also use tables to compare common identifiers found across the blogs. By describing and presenting the data, I am supporting the new categories as an important extension of the deliberative literature and providing the proper backdrop to
begin considering possible ramifications of the research. This study was driven by one main research question and three sub-questions: What is the nature of the deliberation generated on four issues-centered blogs used in high school social studies classrooms? How does the cognitive or task dimension evolve online? What are the social dynamics of the online group? What technological aspects do participants encounter during the online activity?

The three themes that emerged and help explain the nature of these new online deliberative spaces, which are presented in this chapter are (a) conversation over consensus, (b) dynamic tension between authenticity and procedure, and (c) shortcutting reason. The first and third themes call attention to the changing nature of deliberation in the digital medium. The second theme underscores the dialectical tension inherent in public dialogue and, more specifically, the tension involved in public school student dialogue online. In each of the following sections, I present the theme along with brief background information to locate it within the literature until I expound more fully in the final chapter. Then I explain the theme and provide excerpts from the data to illustrate how the finding emerged. The implications discussed herein are definitional since the main research question probes deeply into the notion of what an online deliberation is. I conclude this chapter with a fourth section in which I posit a model of online deliberation used on these four blogs. It is important to note that I present the data throughout this chapter and elsewhere in this dissertation exactly as they appeared on the blogs to most accurately represent the conversations.
Theme I: Conversation Over Consensus

The first theme, “conversation over consensus,” was pervasive and surfaced while I explored the teachers’ blogging rationales in answering the main research question: What is the nature of deliberation generated on four issues-centered blogs used in the high school social studies classroom? This theme emerged frequently while I was considering the first sub-question, How does the cognitive or task dimension evolve online? Presumably none of the blogging teachers under study knows the other blogging teachers and every school is located in a separate part of the country, yet each of their processes of online deliberation about controversial issues shared two fundamental characteristics. Most important in every case was the act of engaging in a social conversation, and least noticeable was the effort to reach a consensus or, in other words, a group decision. In making this observation, I remained open to the possibility that these discussions were just a part of more extensive classroom conversations or reflective activities. The expectation to see some signs of group decision-making comes from the very definition of democratic deliberation as explored in chapter 2. What is more, several blog prompts suggested group decision-making might ensue. Evidence of group decision-making might range from reaching consensus or taking a class vote (see Bickmore, 1997) to having an in-class discussion or requiring individual student reflection following the group discussion (see McMurray, 2007; W. C. Parker, 2006).

In this first section, I consider what role conversation and consensus play in an online deliberation. By definition, deliberation means to reach consensus by way of careful consideration (Burkhalter et al., 2002), and I observed how this manifested
differently in the four blogs under study. During the online activities, I discovered an absence of formal mechanisms for consensus building and viewed the missing procedures or more informal methods through the lens of Schudson (1997) as democracy’s shortfall. The teachers in this study leaned toward W. C. Parker’s (1996) social emphasis on deliberation via democratic conversation and away from Schudson’s procedural demand for consensus. I discuss the finding in light of both perspectives in chapter 6 but for now illustrate how the theme emerged.

Blog by blog, the data in this study illustrated the premium placed on the art of conversation over the formal act of consensus building. What I did not see were aggressive attempts by teachers forcing a decisive consensus. Even though controversy was at the core of each teacher’s agenda, a consensus was largely absent from the blogging activities, whereas a social conversation was the blogging norm. During the constant comparative process this theme crystallized in several ways, which I illustrate next. First, it surfaced in the rationales and assigned instructions revealed in teacher interviews. Next, I saw an emphasis on relationship building across the blogs, and I present exemplars of this, primarily using first the American Issues Blog and then Nick’s Blog Page.

**How the Teachers Indicated a Conversation Over Consensus**

All four teachers indicated during the interviews and in the instructions (see Table 7) that they intended a sociable blogging conversation, but none of the teachers emphasized consensus. I first use examples from the American Issues Blog and then
from the Current Issues Blog to demonstrate how this theme became evident across the four blogs.

On the American Issues Blog a premium is placed on the quality of interaction (i.e., conversation) that takes place during the blogging activity. Steve and Don gave students written instructions about how to “enter a conversation,” how to consider and connect with their audience, how to comment to the discussion in relevant ways, and how to “extend the conversation” (blogging instructions obtained from Steve and Don). These

Table 7

*Teachers’ Blogging Instructions Emphasizing Conversation Over Consensus*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American Issues Blog</th>
<th>Nick’s Blog</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Enter a conversation the same way you would at lunchtime. You might remind people of a previous discussion… | Online discussion (comment) training included a post with these guidelines embedded within a YouTube clip ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDVSw54VU1A&feature=player_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDVSw54VU1A&feature=player_embedded)):
3. Connect with the reader.
4. Inquire. Ask relevant questions at the end of your comment, and keep the conversation going. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tim’s Class Wiki</th>
<th>Current Issues Blog</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| First, I will post a question or comment that will kick off the discussion. To access this, scroll down or click the discussion tab of this screen.
After than, I would like you to reply to that message with thought o your own.
. . . You are welcomed, and urged, to comment on fellow classmates’ statement’s and ideas as well as my own. | About Blogging . . . Expectations for students:
1. be respectful, but do not be afraid to confront others, speak your mind, and defend your positions!
2. add to our understanding of these issues in our democracy and the roles of citizens in working toward improving our society by having these kinds of discussions and possibly solving problems through intense and thoughtful deliberation.
3. keep comments and responses under THREE paragraphs |

teachers emphasized a desire for students to engage effectively in a conversation. I recalled Don’s English background when he explained during our second interview, “I
created these guidelines in an attempt to figure out why [a particular student’s post] is so unsatisfying and how I could help [the student] revise his post” (Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011).

Not only in the instructions but also during this interview, Steve emphasized for the American Issues Blog a conversation that invites careful consideration. He revealed his stance asking me, “How do you define deliberation?” In my response I emphasized decision making, which he then challenged. He contended that a deliberation was far more than demanding decisions; a deliberation is “something that’s carefully considered.” Steve then described his colleague’s blogging rationale as “a little more open ended,” but I saw in their questioning strategy how they both shared a consistent overarching philosophy of openness.

Many blog prompts from Steve and Don indicate they do not want to force a decision that would prematurely end a conversation. They allow students great freedom not only in blogging but also in how they think about issues. Steve explained that Don would say, “there are not always two sides [to an issue]; sometimes there are three, sometimes a multiplicity” (Steve, personal interview, July 23, 2011). According to Don, who encouraged students to consider the many aspects of a topic, such divergent reasoning is valued in their blogging rationale. “We are always asking ‘why’ questions, privileging open-ended questions more than ‘yes’ or ‘no’.”

As I explored this blogging rationale it became clear that, much like Steve and Don, all of the teachers valued a social conversation. By way of another example,
Frank’s blogging instructions (see Table 7) suggest deliberation is key on the Current Issues Blog, but his teaching rationale reveals that reaching a decision is not:

There is no right or wrong. Believe in deliberative democracy with blogging? I don’t. I don’t have to formulate public policy. I’m a school teacher. So what we do is we work out that complexity, I don’t care if we come to consensus about it. I like very much that it’s an open thing. I don’t want that Kumbaya moment. It simply doesn’t happen. (Frank, personal interview, July 21, 2011)

Frank’s statements revealed his stance that teachers talking about “public policy” solutions as simple fixes to complicated problems should be avoided. Frank did not seek mutually acceptable group consensus; he believes it is both undesirable and impossible.

Frank rejected a forced decision and described what he valued as “muddying the waters,” an idea reflected in the immigration controversy discussed by his students. In blogging instructions, Frank directed students to “possibly solving problems through intense and thoughtful deliberation” but first, “add to our understanding of these issues.” His instructions did not avoid conflict, which characterizes authentic decision-making. He directed his students to “Confront others, speak your mind, and defend your positions!” but procedures offered few constraints other than consider readers and the readability of the post. In this hybrid type of deliberative activity, Frank allowed latitude like what I observed from Steve and Don.

The teachers’ common focus on conversation over consensus next surfaced in the topic selections that aligned with their stated rationales (see Table 8). When I analyzed the topic choices and questioning strategies, I found the roots of a conversational
Table 8

Blogging Topics Reveal Conversational Nature

American Issues Blog. You might, for example, want to know how to calculate a tip at a restaurant or remember that a preposition is something you do NOT want to end a sentence with!). But what else can/should schools provide? To what extent should schools concern themselves with challenging your beliefs? Fostering independence? Problem solving? Practicing creativity? Teaching democratic values? Learning to understand our emotional life?

Nick’s Blog. What if Japan had not surrendered after the 2nd atomic bomb on Nagasaki? What would President Truman have done? Invade Japan? Did we have another? What then? Remember Stalin was angry over not being told about USA possession of the bomb. Respond by end of class Wed April 6th.

approach observed during the blogging process itself. During the teacher interviews, I heard their ideas about how controversy might be more carefully considered on a blog, and then I examined their focus across all of the blogs. What I found in teacher intentions, assignments, topic selection, and class documents was a common desire for a more thoughtful discussion, and I expand on this by showing how it manifested in questioning strategy and blogging, first on American Issues Blog and then on Nick’s Blog Page.

How Question Strategy Generated Conversation on American Issues Blog

On the American Issues Blog, I explored the topics that Steve and Don chose and found evidence that their prompts placed a greater value on more carefully considered discussion rather than on yes-or-no arguments. I observed how the topics they had chosen emphasized ways of considering alternative explanations underlying a controversy’s cause rather than creating false dualism typical when trying to resolve an issue. In one case, they wanted students to consider the issue of school reform (see Figure 3). In another case they wanted students to explore the notion of media bias.
While observing the American Issues Blog, I ascertained two general questioning strategies: one seeking resolution and the other seeking explanation.

Characteristically, questions seeking resolution culminate in a decision, oftentimes by way of a “yes” or “no” response. Such was the case when Don asked, “Should there be limits on free speech—or should the court preserve free speech even for the thought it hates?” His question related to an incident where religious protesters picketed the funeral of Mathew Snyder, a gay soldier, with signs that read “God Hates Fags” and “You’re Going to Hell.” The post included a digital audio link to the Supreme Court deliberation.

**Figure 3.** Don’s post evokes student conversation about school reform.
Fahrenheit 450: The Temperature at which Books Get Very, Very Hot

"Rev." Terry Jones received enormous media coverage for his aborted plan to burn thousands of copies of copies of the Koran, the central holy book of Islam. Will he? Won’t he? The media hyped the tension to the level of the Cuban missile crisis — or maybe an episode of 24 would be a more apt comparison.

Jones planned the book burning on the anniversary of 9/11 to oppose the construction of an Islamic cultural center in lower Manhattan and to honor the victims of that tragedy — and can you think of a better way to honor those victims than by inflaming international hatred of the U.S., particularly in Muslim-ruled regions where we still have hundreds of thousands of troops?

What bothers me most is not Jones’ stunt, rather, it is the outsize coverage the non-event received. Jones is a fringe leader of a tiny church in Florida that only counts 50 families among its members. Yet the media devoted this event because of its apparently insatiable appetite for polarizing issues — easy oppositions such as liberal/conservative, right/left, military aggression/objection.

The news coverage reminded me of a book by The Atlantic Monthly’s national correspondent, James Fallows (who visited last year), Inventing the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy. Fallows argues that the media corrupts political discussions by deliberately polarizing and thereby cheapening political discussions. Seeing the world in black and white terms sells space on TV and in newspapers, but it doesn’t allow room for alternate opinion or nuanced readings of complicated events.

The spectacle of this pseudo-event was a media bonanza because it allowed for outlandish lead-up coverage and substantial reaction to Jones’ decision not to burn the books. And worse, the coverage framed most of the same talking heads whose views have long since calcified in those same mindless oppositions. And so it goes.

Figure 4. Don’s post seeks an explanation for a media event.
In another post, Steve directed readers to consider: “What, if anything, should be done about Julian Assange and/or his powerful, yet constantly moving website?” This type of question could lead to explanations, but students took the resolution route instead, arguing only that either something should or should not be done. Despite these infrequent examples, Steve and Don almost always avoided a strategy of seeking resolution. Instead, as shown in the blog about Reverend Jones (see Figure 4) they more frequently sought explanation by asking students to respond in a meaningful way, which does not lend itself toward reaching consensus.

**Carefully Considered Conversation Exemplified by American Issues Blog**

After examining the types of questions used, I followed the focus of the online interactions and “listened” while students commented on various aspects of a given issue conversationally. While topically related, the logical connections between comments diverged from both Steve and Don’s original questions—again showing the conversational approach rather than a decision-making path toward consensus. I observed students sometimes questioning each other’s assumptions as a result of the teacher’s “why” prompts. Most of what I found, however, was agreeable conversation. Table 9 illustrates the type of agreeable conversation that was common and shows one student’s own awareness that decision-making and consensus are absent from the Current Issues Blog. Rarely did students challenge the teacher’s assumptions—a point discussed later.

On this blog and the others I found the range of explanations difficult to follow without elaborate, note-mapping schemata of who said what to whom—another indication of the absence of consensus. Like everyday discussions, the online
class interaction diverged and was prone to misunderstandings. Warrants, the reasoning in an argument that justifies the move from grounds to claim (Freeley & Steinberg, 2009, p. 512), operate at a high level of generalization. Because warrants were typically implied, students who skimmed through the discussion may have gotten lost or may have gone off track. Nevertheless, the conversation remained robust. As I found and illustrate next, many of the blogging conversations led to misunderstandings and opened the door for further explanation—more “why” questioning and even more divergent conversations.

Don usually structured his posts to elicit reaction, not a decision, and he communicated (to me and to his students) that a primary goal behind the blogging activities is for students to explore and understand underlying causation (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011). One conversation focused on the media “stunt” of religious leader Rev. Terry Jones that evoked media frenzy and became headline news. Don suggested that media polarized the controversy and asked students for their opinions.
Reasoned student arguments diverged along many paths, always away from consensus. While this blogging post might have had many points of entry, Don focused on the media’s exaggeration of the event and compared it to an episode of the popular TV drama *24*: “Will he or won’t he?” Don claimed the media corrupt political discussions by deliberately polarizing issues, thereby cheapening reasonable discourse. In his post, he added his voice to the controversy as follows:

The coverage featured most of the same talking heads whose views have long since calcified in those same mindless oppositions . . . by inflaming international hatred of the U.S., particularly in Muslim-ruled regions where we still have hundreds of thousands of troops.

This controversial issue had gained traction in the age of social networking. As seen in his post, Don explained that he wanted students to consider how “seeing the world in black and white sells ad space . . . it allowed for outlandish lead-up coverage and substantial reaction to Jones’ decision not to burn the books.” As a result of this type of question, divergent conversation often ensued.

In this case, instead of focusing on media coverage, however, the students commented on a variety of topics that involved issues of fairness. Shawn, the first commenter, digressed into a speculative line of inquiry, not about the media, but rather about his own reaction to the event. When he compared Western and Arab religious actions he considered Muslims as reactionaries. Shawn’s focus was not the media, it was on the Muslim religion as his comment shows.
Shawn claimed that media barely recognize assaults on Western beliefs by Arab nations, while “a tiny event in the United States is blown out of proportion.” His claims were largely speculative, unsupported, or indicative of hasty generalizations. In short, each of Shawn’s claims was controversial (see Figure 5). The 11 posts that followed revealed critical thinking and strong rhetorical skills but a logical structure that only tangentially related to Don’s question about the media and were instead mostly critical of Shawn’s use of evidence. Few comments addressed Don’s query.

**15 comments:**

![Comment](image)

Isn’t it interesting how as you say, “such an non-event” gets a lot of coverage here and tempers flare in Arab nations. I read that recently 10,000 people attended an anti-US rally in Afghanistan, more than in years, just because of the threat of burning their holy book. Contrast this with statements by certain middle eastern leaders who want a whole people group wiped out, and burnings of holy books like the Bible occur very frequently in the Middle East, Asia, and eastern Europe. These events are barely recognized by media, (this goes back to how to get information out of the mainstream media) while a tiny event in the United States is blown out of proportion. Clearly this overreaction in the Middle East is something to think about as well.

*September 12, 2010 1:34 PM*

*Figure 5.* Shawn seeds the first comment of the Koran burning controversy.

Just one student, Phil, directly focused on the media analysis seeded in Don’s original post. Ultimately, Phil did restate the teacher’s implied warrant and in doing so demonstrated his own reasoning skills. In agreement with his teacher, Phil posted: “News today is not so much news for the viewers to make opinions on, but rather a product to sell to the audience.” Phil added keen insight: “A story on a topic like this [a
controversial figure such as Jones] will have almost everyone agreeing on it.” Thus it is not surprising that what resulted was an agreeable discussion rather than a traditional deliberation since students were instructed to “add to the conversation.”

This particular discussion was just one of many displaying the conversational nature of the American Issues Blog. According to Steve and Don, who encourage students to consider many aspects of a topic, such divergent reasoning is expected and valued when blogging.

**How Question Strategy Influenced Conversation on Nick’s Blog**

On Nick’s Blog, Figure 6 shows how I observed a leaning toward questions of explanation, which generated conversations but in this case expedient ones. His blogging prompts were designed so that students might uncover alternative interpretations. As introduced in chapter 4, Nick’s use of a counter-factual questioning strategy was designed to reexamine historical assumptions. As exemplified in the Tea Party post (see Figure 6), Nick provoked conversation around a familiar claim that the [current] Tea Party backers propagandized historical symbols, and so had the media.

Unlike Steve and Don, Nick actually stressed the decision-making process and an instructional focus on building 21st century workplace skills (e.g., the ability to write online), as I discovered during our interview. Nick’s assignment instructions provide further evidence of his conversational goals (see Table 7), but it was his rubric that sought decisiveness. The rubric asks student to review, reflect, revise, and evaluate. His blogging instructions advised students to “Write a quality comment!” Students are instructed to proofread, capitalize the letter at the beginning of a sentence, use
punctuation at the end of a sentence, use exclamation marks sparingly, and always capitalize the pronoun, “I.” Lastly, he directed, “Keep the conversation going.” Nick made his expectations clear and relied on deadlines and formal assessments. He assessed whether students got the facts right, and he modeled a blogging style that was task-oriented.

Figure 6. Nick’s multi-question prompt elicits perfunctory responses.
During our interview I discovered how Nick, like the other teachers, emphasized a critical examination of the news media. I further explored Nick’s assumptions about media bias and polarization. The “right way” to consider historical evidence is in its context, he asserted (Nick, phone interview, June 22, 2011). Nick believes a teacher’s democratic responsibility is to teach students how to expose information bias when they observe it. In particular, Nick wanted his history students to weigh the validity of historical knowledge when stated as fact. He believed historical facts are changed to comport with current interpretations, and consequentially, facts are subject to media manipulation. Nick explained his blogging philosophy as follows:

We teach [students] not to be manipulated by what you see on television or cable news because it is not always the total truth. [So for example] I have questions when we talk about the Revolutionary War. I think I had a blog post about the [Boston] Tea Party and different symbols they used at the time. I try to use a modern twist. It [the current Tea Party] really does not mean that in a historical context. We talk about that and the history behind certain symbols and images and people and how they see it used today not in a historical context. And the way it can be misused. It’s about using history the right way; not misinformed and [not] to use ideas for their political benefit. (Nick, phone interview, June 22, 2011)

With an instructional purpose to uncover bias in the media, Nick revealed his own perspective.
From the student comments, I observed confusion about what the questions were asking as well as an eagerness to complete the assignment.

**An Efficient Conversation Epitomized on Nick’s Blog**

On Nick’s Blog I witnessed his *desire* for decision-making and for carefully considered conversation, but with his emphasis on decisiveness notwithstanding, I found a lack of consensus on the students’ part. Although the blogging was conversational, I did not observe students reaching consensus. What was present on Nick’s Blog that I hadn’t seen in the previous blogging community was expediency among the students to get the work done.

I saw during the blogging activity about Tea Party symbols that students conceded quickly to their teacher’s implied warrant despite the fact that advocates and at least one historian on NPR claimed the new Tea Party arguments for limited government were appropriately used symbols. Julie’s comment is one example:

> The second images are used by the Tea Parties, which do not necessarily agree with some laws that are in place. It jives the meaning because the way that they are using it contrasts so greatly against how the colonists were originally using it and how they intended it to be used.

While some students avoided difficult critical thinking questions others, like Julie, attempted to address bias by simply restating the question’s premise. Nick had insinuated the media misappropriated historical symbols, assuming his students would find a similar connection (Nick, phone interview, June 22, 2011). In doing so, he guided his students
away from a current controversy. Nick introduced bias, but rather than defending or refuting, most students missed the point.

In large part, students overlooked the controversy altogether and appeared motivated foremost by a desire to get the assignment done. They seemed more concerned with meeting the rubric’s demands than with investigating the issue. Nick’s assignments had a converging influence on his students’ discussion; however, I did not observe the type of careful consideration he desired. Guided by Nick’s questions, students were seen procedurally answering a multi-part question. They numbered and then labeled their responses, continuing to mistakenly use the word *jive* for *jibe*, as it had appeared in the prompt.

In identifying the “political/cultural context” of the symbols, Tracy answered succinctly: “These images are being used in political campaigns as well as in commercials.” While she and other students recognized these as political symbols or corporate logos, only a few attempted a vague explanation of historical versus political difference, as Kelsey did:

> nowadays, these images are being used for advertisements. one example is for nike. they use the slogan and flag don’t tred on me in a similar way but in a different context. whereas the colonies used this to show they dont want england to treat them poorly, nike and the soccer team use this to say they wont be beat by anyone else. it is clever advertising but nothing like the historical meaning. 

In her attempt to differentiate, Kelsey suggested a difference between Nike’s symbolic meaning of being on top and a historical meaning of not being defeated. As was typical
in this discussion, her analysis avoided any direct connection to the current controversial Tea Party movement even though connecting the two ideas was Nick’s intention.

Of the 55 comments, only 11 students identified the symbols with the current “Tea Party” movement, which in our interview Nick told me was his purpose, while the remaining 44 students recognized the symbols more broadly. A more typical comment was Sam’s, “‘Join or die’ is a well known cartoon created by Benjamin Franklin,” or as John wrote, “It is a pictorial representation of colonial unity.” In these two instances, the students hadn’t explained how or why symbols were misappropriated; they simply identified their patent meaning in context. In answering the question, no matter how curt, they satisfied the assignment. Few students considered how historical symbols were being currently understood, or the degree to which they were being misunderstood or misused. They were not attuned to the ongoing conversation, either with their classmates or online; that was the consideration that escaped their blogging talk.

What stood out on Nick’s Blog was that student responses were typically brief, and an obligatory attempt to meet most of the enumerated rules and reminders was common. For instance, students were instructed to “answer each question asked,” and in turn they posted a corresponding list of responses. When satisfying another two-part question students did exactly as told, numbering their responses to get full credit and adding to the requisite conversation.

To sum up, Nick’s Blog and the American Issues Blog contained the most pronounced exemplars of the online forums and their conversational nature—whether the blogging was an extended conversation or more cursory—as opposed to consensus.
Also, the sense of responsibility described above was found to some extent on every blog and this, in fact, emerged as the next finding.

**Theme II: Dynamic Tension Between Authenticity and Procedure**

The second theme, “dynamic tension between authenticity and procedure,” emerged while I was trying to answer the second sub-question, What are the social dynamics of the online group? Procedure was characterized in a variety of ways, including communication norms, classroom structure, modeling behaviors, and dutiful participation. On one hand, authentic voices and concerns surfaced within the conversations, but they were juxtaposed with signs of students eager to follow procedures and please the teachers. It is important to keep in mind that this finding is based on the perception of authenticity. Moreover, authenticity may manifest itself in various aspects of the online conversation from the issues selected to the students’ opinions and the way those opinions are expressed.

Again, Doolittle and Hicks (2003) remind us “the construction of knowledge involves social mediation within cultural contexts” (p. 11). Integral to such mediation within classroom deliberations are authentic engagement and procedural norms or structure for the discussion. Simulating real-world situations motivates students to learn and helps students achieve deeper learning because they become authentically engaged (Dewey, 1915; Glassman, 2001), but a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978) shows why rules and procedures are essential to social living and cultural learning. Gutmann and Thompson (2004) recognized the inherent tension between the two:
Indeed, we should be suspicious of any theoretical principle that offers simple rules for complex cases of moral conflict that representatives and their constituents confront. But deliberative accountability can help us avoid the mistaken tendencies of the forms of accountability favored in procedural and constitutional democracy. (p. 163)

In theory, a classroom deliberation would inspire passion and original expression while also developing habits of citizenship and civility in students, but tension develops because in practice one is necessarily at odds with the other. The second finding presented here and expounded upon in chapter 6 examines these two competing characteristics, authenticity and procedure (see Table 10), and also speaks to the nature of online deliberation.

Table 10

*Categories of Tension Between Authenticity and Procedure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example of Authenticity</th>
<th>Example of Procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Parents, alumni, and outsiders blogged</td>
<td>Students rushed to meet deadline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etiquette</td>
<td>Students addressed each other by name</td>
<td>Students appeared overly polite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playfulness</td>
<td>Students joked about sports, celebrities</td>
<td>Students mirrored teacher’s joking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Presentation</td>
<td>Students shared personal stories</td>
<td>Blogging assignment required photos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasing the teacher</td>
<td>Students challenged the teacher</td>
<td>Students modeled the teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When examining the social interaction on the four high school social studies blogs, several categories relating to the virtual class climate illuminated this tension
between authenticity and procedure. In this section I present compelling evidence that illustrates opposing forces of this second theme. The data coalesced around how members participated, how students treated one another, how students joked online, how individuals presented themselves, and how students tried to please the teachers. Characteristics in all of these categories contributed to or detracted from the authentic nature of the deliberations.

**Tension Created by Participation**

One of the first aspects I noticed was the quantity and quality of authentic engagement sometimes generated by the level of participation since equality among discussants is a hallmark of deliberation (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Table 11 shows equality might mean anyone (inside or outside of the class) can participate or it might mean equivalence in terms of the amount of time any one speaker has the floor.

The American Issues Blog and its individual student blogs were open to and actually attracted participants from outside of the class, adding to what felt like an
authentic public deliberation. During one blogging activity, I observed a parent join
students in the deliberation about public education. Steve shared with me another case
about comments generated from all over the country responding to one student who took
a stance on how a particular disease was presented in the media. The student had
inadvertently created a maelstrom by wondering out loud why Duchenne was named
differently than other types of muscular dystrophy, speculating it may be motivated by
marketing. Those touched by the disease were quick to respond. “[T]hank you for
saving me the trouble of Googling the word ‘imbecile’ because in my opinion that is
what you clearly are,” wrote the parent of a boy with Duchenne (Unrelated commenter,
American Issues Blog).

The overwhelming response and unintended consequences were authentic and
became a teachable moment for the student who, after more careful consideration,
attempted to make amends by having the post removed from the Internet and apologizing
online. “What a thoughtful reconsideration of your earlier post,” wrote a doctor who had
tuned in. Several follow-up comments sounded like this, “As one of the parents who
posted on your last blog, I would like to say thank you for posting [the apology].” In a
bigger-than-life experience, blogging taught this student how much words matter, even
his.

With the additional activity on individual student blogs, I observed on the class
blog for American Issues that only about a third of the students commented during any
one discussion, but those comments usually were inspired. Typically, a student posted
just once. Students acknowledged each other but exchanges back and forth were rare;
and students did not appear to extend themselves past the assignment. Still, each student’s one comment was usually a complete argument without technical errors and, since every student was not mandated to comment each time, those who did post a comment appeared as if they genuinely wanted to weigh in on the topic. Different students commented from one conversation to another, so over the course of the year I observed somewhat equal participation. As previously mentioned, a focus of the class was on individual student blogs, and this impacted participation on the class blog. Since students each had their own forum, they were able to freely express themselves on those forums as well and did so sometimes instead of commenting on the class blog. For the most part, a student’s individuality came out even more on the personal blogs.

On Nick’s Blog, I observed students blogging but no outsiders; therefore, this and other traits rendered the conversation less authentic than the American Issues Blog. As mentioned during the discussion of the first theme, it appeared on Nick’s Blog more as if students were often doing what they were told rather than joining in the conversation for its intrinsic value. Whereas it is the students’ role to meet the measured instructional requirements, I observed few instances of students delving deeply into the conversation by researching data, questioning assumptions, and evoking follow-up responses from others by disagreeing.

Deadlines were firm within many of the blog posts, and students responsibly met those deadlines. Students posted throughout the day and before and after school, often just before deadline. In his blog posts, Nick reminded his students regularly about deadlines such as, “Answer post by Wed May 11th noon and respond to one of your
peers.” Nick’s influence was seen as a student, commenting beyond the grading deadline wrote, “Sorry, this is kind of late.” Another indicator of procedure was detailed in the prior section. Students appeared to meet most of the rules and reminders but rarely exceeded the minimum criteria.

On Tim’s Class Wiki, the teacher provoked a controversial discussion among his students both inside and outside the classroom, and the ongoing nature of the conversation sometimes rang sincere and sometimes sounded more contrived. When introducing a “hot topics” discussion, Tim welcomed participants as follows: “It is important to read the comments of those who posted before you. You are welcomed, and urged, to comment on fellow classmates’ statements and ideas as well as my own.” In so doing, Tim invites new ideas. Additionally, on a sidebar labeled “Course Resources,” Tim linked class documents, lectures, multimedia, and discussions. By providing easy access and common points of discussion, students were invariably seen interacting with the materials and, when instructed, with each other. Students referred regularly to Tim’s posted resources when the directions called for it.

The quality of participation on the Current Issues Blog was distinct and showed signs of authenticity. There is one trait all but this blog shared. The issue under discussion changed regularly—weekly and, in some cases, daily. Current Issues Blog, on the other hand, focused on one topic for an extended period. Rather than having various students randomly posting comments, Frank’s blogging assignment was an in-depth conversation about the controversial issue of immigration. Moreover, Frank invited
participation from another class in another school starkly different than Hoover High. Both classes were described in chapter 4.

Throughout the immigration deliberation, I observed authentic engagement with students listening, reacting, arguing, considering opinions, and frequently taking decisive stands—76 times in agreement and 16 times in disagreement. Oftentimes students used rhetorical strategies to provoke interactivity such as sarcasm, jabs, and pointed questioning. In one instance a student commented, “Do you think that they [immigrants] have the right to be here and that that right is protected by the constitution?” In this example Jim’s question extended the conversation. Three classmates responded by giving reasons we should not force immigrants to return to their countries of origin.

Some of the posts were long, extensively researched, and emotionally argued, sometimes exceeding the assignment’s three-paragraph limit. However, I also observed lulls in the conversation. In some cases, posts that contained muddled arguments or terse, confusing comments received few, if any, replies. One example of this follows: “i do not know wat im writinqq abt..lol.” Frank explained that posts of this nature were from the participating school in New York, and such posts suggested students may not have wanted to participate. Many of the students from New York chose to write one- or two-sentence reactions to the immigration issue. Rarely, did they react to any other posts. In this sense, I found a telling realness in their reactions.

**Tension Created by Etiquette**

A second category of tension between authenticity and procedure was the idea of online manners and sensitivity toward others, both of which sometimes lessened and at
other times enhanced the genuine nature of the discussion. Students demonstrated
etiquette and empathy by way of affective language representing emotion, civility,
personal greetings, use of classmates’ names, signs of sympathy or applause, and
inclusive language such as “we” or “our” (see Table 12).

Table 12

*Online Etiquette as Seen Across Blogs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American Issues Blog</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Again, Emma brings up a good point.; Wow! Deep in the heart of Texas . . .; Max thanks for flipping the table around.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick’s Blog</td>
<td>“Mr. Bill W, I agree with everything you said. I concur on the meaning of the flags. They show the colonies [sic] readiness to strike.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim’s Class Wiki</td>
<td>“yeah, right*; i agree 100% with barry barkley.; Exactly, Casey; i agree with Di.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Manners and empathy influenced authenticity differently depending on the context.

When reading through the American Issues Blog, I felt as if I were reading the
transcripts of a polite panel discussion. In analyzing the online interaction to better
understand the social climate, I found patterns in how the students were talking to each
other. This, on the one hand, was pleasing to read and on the other hand seemed
unnaturally polite for high school juniors. Expressive words made the conversation feel
personal, such as, “I like,” “I love,” and “Wow.” Students customarily referred to each
other by first name. This convention added a layer of civility to the conversation’s tone
such as “Emma brings up a good point.” Personal attacks were avoided even in
disagreement with another student’s idea. Because of the blogging instructions it became
customary for students to paraphrase specific arguments before weighing in on another
student’s comment, which was an indicator of listening. For example, “If I understand you right” or “like you said” were typical comments. Polite affirmations were also common such as “I completely agree with much of what has been said,” “I think everybody has made good points,” or “while I tend to agree with . . . I can’t help make an exception in this case.” Other word choices conveyed a tone of civility such as when one student began a post with “Hi Guys.”

A friendly tone was present in nearly every comment and suggested a cohesive group. I asked Steve and Don about the politeness of their students online, remembering all the times I monitored high school hallways and regularly admonished students’ bad language. Both teachers concurred they had good kids (an expected response from two caring teachers), but they went further to explain that the tone of a conversation emerged from the “authentic nature” of their blogging activity, or more specifically a sincere desire on the part of the students to attract an audience. Steve expressed that kids at the school tend to be polite, which he attributes mostly to the socio-economic circumstances. He said their politeness is natural and probably correlates with the tremendous pressure to succeed (Steve, personal interview, June 25, 2011).

When students put more time into writing and reading blog posts, it suggested genuine interest and intrinsic motivation. Comments on the American Issues Blog averaged 189 words and thus took longer to read (up to two minutes per blog post). The expressions of courtesy thus appeared a bit more natural in the context of American Issues students, who, according to the teachers, also show a natural desire for self-expression, inclusion, empathy, and for their voice to make a difference. Students were
experimenting with expressing themselves while learning acceptable jargon of debate and rhetorical strategies that attract readers (e.g., I respectfully disagree, etc.).

Nick’s students, on the other hand, displayed heightened civility that on his class blog appeared procedural rather than authentic. This blog averaged just 92 words per comment, and I often saw errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation within the posts. Thus I found the formal tone of heightened etiquette contrasted with the cursory posts and the casual use of standard English. These students were tepid in deliberating and rarely impolite, which made sense when I discovered in Nick’s assignment instructions that politeness was a grading criterion. Students referenced each other by first name, and when they used emotion, they were courteous. More often, students showed neutrality in their word choices.

I observed students playing it safe by agreeing rather than disagreeing in conversation, particularly near the end of a comment string. During a deliberation over former President George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq, only three students objected to another student’s argument, whereas 18 students posted concurring opinions. This pattern gave the appearance of piling on by taking sides. Over the 26-post conversation, I found the word “agree” appeared 187 times and “disagree” or “I don’t agree” 55 times. Students strengthened their agreement with adverbs, such as “completely,” “fully,” and “lovingly.” I observed only two occasions where students modified their disagreement, and then it was lukewarm as in this case: “I don’t think I agree with you.”

In general the tone on Nick’s Blog was conversational indifference. I found out during our interview that he also recognized a lack of enthusiasm. He told me, “I
challenge them and say, ‘Look, this is a serious topic.’ That is the challenge I am trying to figure out. And we are trying to deal with now with a site like this . . . assessment.” He emphasized a rubric as a solution, “with a three-column spreadsheet I just give them three checks . . . I explain the rubric at the beginning of the year and reinforce it throughout the semester.” Nick’s solution was accountability and he told me he intended to refine the grading criteria.

I observed dynamics on Tim’s Class Wiki that were similar to Nick’s Blog with respect to the role of online etiquette and procedure. Bloggers in Tim’s class averaged 62 words per post, and yet those brief comments were riddled with mechanical errors. Students on Tim’s Class Wiki typically used popular texting conventions that ignore rules of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Nevertheless, Tim, like Nick, was purposive about the role civility should play in deliberative blogging, and this awareness came out during our interview.

It really has been a good way for them to practice having a critical conversation with each other—maybe criticizing an idea and not taking offense to it. Some kids have gotten that, some haven’t. That’s what you should be teaching them anyway. That’s just part of a good social studies classroom is you try to go from just giving answers to having an actual dialogue with some. Some kids don’t get it. I have had some kids who just become angry and they come in and won’t talk with some person because they disagree with their post. That’s the learning experience and you start with that and you try to get to the other.
Tim’s strategy to facilitate appropriate interactivity, or netiquette, was evident both on the blog, and by posted procedures. He explained how he dealt with poor online behaviors.

I actually kept the post on there, and the next class I went over the rules of classroom deliberations. And I actually had this thing that’s called Rules of Academic Engagement or something, I came up with something silly. I put all of the rules that we have. You know, ‘You are discussing ideas, you are not arguing against people’ type thing. ‘You are not talking down, you respect people’s ideas’—all of the basic things you teach them . . . but I tried to turn that into a lesson in itself. It seemed to work a little bit. But you are always going to have a few kids [who don’t get it or don’t follow the rules].

Netiquette (proper manners on the Internet) requires some empathy, and I observed on the blog students mostly following common protocols of civility.

Formal protocols guided communication online and sometimes appeared contrived, particularly in shorter posts where more of the content was devoted to “being nice” than to the substance of the conversation. Students customarily used each other’s names, but infrequently and in no particular pattern. This appeared similar to a face-to-face conversation where one might choose to reference another by name (Joe said) rather than identifying a conversant by pronoun (he said).

While much of the conversation on the Current Issues Blog appeared authentic, many other behaviors were noticeably unnatural in the online context, either overly bold or unnaturally polite. Students on Frank’s Blog, like students on the other blogs, customarily followed the courtesy of using first names. Comments on the Current Issues
Blog averaged 143 words and generally followed standard rules of English, so the formality appeared more natural in this context, which more closely resembled what you might hear during a deliberation or debate. However, I also observed sensitivity to readers during which participants continually paraphrased a prior point then, in playful banter, used sir names such as, “Mr. Bigcity” or “Mr. Spurley.” In one case, a student’s sensitivity emerged as an authentic conversation dictated he use a more natural tone with his friend Anna. “Anna (it feels awkward to refer to you as Ms. Anderson.”) Students were testing the online writing conventions, and they were finding the line between fake and fun.

**Tension Created by Playfulness**

Play, in fact, added to the authentic nature of the online interaction. The data were replete with evidence of this third category, playfulness, in varying degrees across different conversations.

Students on American Issues Blog wrote in a natural, conversational tone (e.g., y’all, Hi Guys, etc.) and regularly injected humorous comments such as the remark one student made about WikiLeaks, “This has got Hollywood Blockbuster all over it!” and suggested casting Kiefer Sutherland or Jude Law as Julian Assange. Use of puns and wordplay added a natural levity to the blog, particularly given the context of high school students.

Students on Nick’s Blog focused primarily on completing the assignment, which resulted in a serious-minded tone. Infrequent comments added a touch of lightheartedness and authenticity. One student used a clever analogy in calling the
Boston Tea Party “the revolutionary war equivalent of a viral ad campaign.” Two other unrelated comments illustrated a rare lightness in this conversation: “you are a very smart child and i agree with you completely” and the casual reference to a “crappy president.” Table 13 provides more examples of the type of playfulness observed.

Table 13

*Authenticity in Play*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>American Issues Blog</strong></td>
<td>“David, I leave you with one bit of advice: leave the Cubs or Die (Hard) without ever seeing another pennant, let-alone a World Series title. I’m no Sox fan, not a fan of baseball at all, just a realist.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nick’s Blog</strong></td>
<td>“You sir, are a simple minded fellow.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tim’s Class Wiki</strong></td>
<td>“hi mom”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Issues Blog</strong></td>
<td>“O WOW PEOPLE LIKE TO DRINK. WHO KNEW”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Every now and then jokes, wordplay, irony, randomness, or lightheartedness contributed to authenticity in the context of an online high school classroom.

When talking about Tim’s Class Wiki, Tim offered this advice for new teachers who want to facilitate online discussion: “I would probably say, the first thing is getting comfortable, letting go a little bit.” After several years of practice, Tim leverages the online platform explaining:

When you do this type of thing, you are giving up a little control to the kids. If kids are going to be online and doing stupid things you gotta teach them not to. So you might as well have them do something dumb in your class and then discuss it.
Conversations adopted a more casual tone at the beginning of the year such as the post by one student who randomly wrote, “hi mom.” Other prevalent signs of the casual tone were: shortcuts in grammar, creativity in spelling, and misuse of punctuation. A new pattern evolved through the semester where students could be seen writing more correctly and following the prompts more literally.

Students on the Current Issues Blog genuinely seemed to enjoy blogging. They often referred to each other by nickname. One student tapped into sarcasm when she responded with “GASP” to another student who suggested modifying the 14th Amendment. This type of humor may have crossed the line, however, when a student wrote, “I’m glad that you, like any other AP Gov student, can cite the provisions of the 14th Amendment and the history before and after its passage.” Notwithstanding, the sarcasm tucked into the comment revealed genuine emotion and contributed to the blog’s authentic nature. Humor served multiple purposes, but on the Current Issues Blog I observed it being used mostly as a rhetorical tool as in one student’s retort: “The point is, these immigrants are as human as you, I, even Frank [the teacher].” While observing this blog, I regularly witnessed cogent arguments sprinkled with light spirited humor that added personality to the online forum.

**Tension Created by Self-Presentation**

The way students and teachers presented themselves added to the authentic nature of the blogs. Personal expression, a fourth category I gleaned from the data, helped bloggers create online identities and allowed originality.
Table 14

*Self-Presentation as a Sign of Authenticity*

| American Issues Blog | “The problem is, people are not always aware of how and why their perceptions are being manipulated. Remember our discussion in class on this question: What would you do if you felt an injustice was being done? In this case I felt I had to act. My wife and I also felt it was important to show our children how democracy works . . .” |
| Current Issues Blog | “I am an immigrant myself; however, my parents went through substantial documentation and had to go through a series of background checks in order to adopt me from Russia . . .; This was the case with my family when we immigrated from Iran; On my mother’s side of the family, they are all from Europe . . .” |

*Note.* Personal expression enhanced the authenticity among the blogging activities.

Self-expression was especially evident on the American Issues Blog (see Table 14), where students were required to maintain individual blogs. This supplemented the class online activity, and students sometimes referred to their own blogs thus adding to their personal identities as in the case of one student who wrote about educational reform, “I just blogged about this very same thing and the effects it has on our holiday spirit if you wanna check that out.” And in another instance during a deliberation about WikiLeaks, a student continued building his own image: “Now I know I was pretty consistent at bashing Bush and his policies (don’t get me started about waterboarding again), but he did a terrible job about keeping the public informed about what is happening in the world.” In addition to adding to the substance of the conversation, this student served to maintain his personal identity by reminding others of his worldview as it was revealed in a previous conversation.

As a sideline observer of the conversation on the American Issues Blog, I frequently observed authentic engagement throughout the blogging process that appeared
to stem from a student’s need for self-expression. Certain names became familiar to me and began taking on personas even though I had never met any of the students. Across several of the blogs particular students stood out in the electronic discussion, and I learned during teacher interviews some of these students were not nearly as expressive in the classroom. Bryan was one such student, and I learned about his story during my interview with Steve.

Being shy, Bryan did not say more than two words when entering the class (Steve, personal interview, June 25, 2011). Yet, when he wrote his responses to blog prompts, students, as well as both Steve and Don discovered a hidden intelligence. By highlighting good writing and thinking in class, the teachers and the digital discussion helped bring him out of his shell. In class, Steve would refer specifically to ideas Bryan wrote on his blog. Students would listen to what Bryan would say in class, something that did not happen before he began blogging in earnest. For the American Issues teachers, affirmation through positive reinforcement was purposive and planned in and out of the classroom.

During the online conversations, moments of personal disclosure were observed such as one student’s blog post, “I myself was in Madison to protest on that Saturday.” To inform a conversation about the purpose of education, another student posted the following comment: “As a screenwriter, my dad is constantly working on something new, and is constantly challenging himself.” The online interaction provided an outlet for personal expression.
In Tim’s Class Wiki, like in the American Issues Blog, Tim integrated individual student forums into class assignments, allowing students to personalize conversations. During our interview he explained he asked students to identify with topics they care about. Not only did concerns become more visible, so did unique attributes of each student. All students created a personal WikiSpaces account, and each tackled a different topic from climate change to poverty. Just as I saw in American Studies class, individual student profiles and websites were automatically linked to the class in Tim’s Class Wiki.

Comments were associated with student accounts where they identified themselves with a photograph or a symbolic representation. Whether it was a symbol of a favorite team or a flattering picture, students’ ideas were accompanied by personal identification. Many had elected to reveal certain personal information such as a first name, a last name, or a nickname. Students were individually identifiable to an outsider. Occasionally, I observed authentic engagement. One student, in particular, who posted as much as 10 times more than most other students, engaged in a volley with another student on a heated issue. The high energy and rapid-fire transaction appeared more affective and ego-driven than issue-based or substantive. Another student responded five times to the controversy posed about putting a mosque at the World Trade Center site. Her remarks challenged other ideas she had read and were characteristic of the back-and-forth nature of this conversation. Within this controversial question many students posted repeatedly, freely in disagreement.

On Frank’s Blog, individual identities surfaced via many of the students’ own stories. From observing their conversation, I could tell these students were concerned
about the issues of immigration. Such was the case when one student spent part of an evening writing, “I am an immigrant myself,” and continued to blog about his family’s immigration story. This student simultaneously met the needs of rhetoric and personal expression. Bringing his first-hand experience to the deliberation, he described:

My parents went through substantial documentation and had to go through a series of background checks in order to adopt me from Russia and in order for me to become a legal U.S. citizen. It seems only fair that other immigrants should have to do the same.

I saw a repeated pattern in how student identities morphed into opinions, which in turn enhanced authenticity. It was apparent when another student entered the conversation, “This was the case with my family when we immigrated from Iran,” and identified herself throughout the immigration controversy, “Although I agree with the general thoughts being posted, I see things on a totally different level being an immigrant myself.” She continued using her family background in argumentation and, by doing so, helped her classmates to appreciate how immigration politics were the fabric of family history. Similarly a third student disclosed,

On my mother’s side of the family, they are all from Europe, even my mother herself. She moved here when she was about 16. Granted, she was a bit ridiculed because of her accent and lack of understanding to the English Language.

As this student laid out her argument, I considered her perspective representative of an unspoken majority. She expressed her value, “We are a nation of immigrants,” and used that assertion to justify her opinion, while other students applied the same sentiment,
some less personally. This student was personalizing her arguments by sharing her European heritage. As is often the case, we are our arguments.

**Tension Created by Pleasing the Teacher**

Finally, a fifth category heightened the tension and actually detracted from the authentic nature of the blogging—a perception that rather than engaging naturally students were modeling the teacher or motivated primarily by the need to please the teacher (see Table 15).

**Table 15**

*Pleasing the Teacher*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog Type</th>
<th>Example Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Issues Blog</td>
<td>&quot;I myself was in Madison to protest on that Saturday, and there, as DC [Don] pointed out, was no need for any arrests.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick’s Blog</td>
<td>&quot;You have good points in your answer, and although strong, do not answer all the questions asked . . . Overall I agree with what you are saying, but you should answer the asked questions in detail first before going into detail about your other thoughts.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim’s Class Wiki</td>
<td>&quot;A congressman’s decision should be based on what’s best for the people rather than who will offer the most money. For example, Mr. Tim mentioned in class how a congressman would probably do what a banker requests rather than what a farmer requests because a banker would most likely give the most money.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Issues Blog</td>
<td>&quot;Frank said statistics show that when given the opportunity, people who may not be as well qualified as the ‘average’ college student . . .”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Student-to-teacher interaction along with references to the teacher by students appeared dutiful.

In American Issues Blog, although peer-to-peer interaction was most common, the attempt to “please the teacher” was a type of interaction observed between student and instructors and confirmed by teacher interviews. Steve and Don told me that in public these students are pleasers, especially with the teacher. Achievement drives an
outward appearance of wellbeing, which might merely be for show (Don, personal interview, June 25, 2011). This tendency could be observed when students referenced a teacher in their own comments—often agreeing with what the teacher had said as in the student who posted the following, “. . . and there, as SC [the teacher] pointed out, was no need for any arrest.” In the following example, the student not only showed signs of trying to please the teacher by inviting her father to blog but also of pleasing the parent. “Hi, This is (student’s) father. This evening (student) happily surprised me by asking, ‘Dad, are you in the mood to read (Mr. D’s) blog post and write a comment?’ This was music to my ears. Here goes . . .” Pleasing the teacher is a theme that was consistent across blogs. Just as class climate plays an essential role in the classroom, so too the social dimension is important online. As seen throughout the data and illustrated below, students would almost without exception state the name to whom they were responding, paraphrase the idea they were addressing, and add an original idea to the conversation.

On the Current Issues Blog students regularly responded directly to Frank and modeled his behavior. For instance, when entering the conversation Frank was seen challenging a student, “The citizenship clause has been in existence for over 100 years. To change it based on a current problem that might be settled through other means is dangerous in my eyes. Tell me why I am wrong.” Immediately one student satisfied the teacher’s query: “Frank, I’ll tell you why you’re wrong . . .” Frank was observed several times posting in various parts of the conversation. In turn, his students responded either as a direct challenge as indicated above, or indirectly as reflected in the following words of his student:
Our jails don’t even remotely have the resources, and deportation seems fruitless since people can come right back over our border. Is a fence, a wall, a better alternative? Let me know what you think Frank, I’ll tell you why you’re wrong.

Not only is the student directly addressing the teacher, but the student also is mirroring the teacher’s conversational tone and style of blogging. Students regularly cited Frank, addressed Frank, and challenged Frank, which in this class where the teacher underscores the need for students to think critically are all signs of pleasing the teacher.

In all four cases, the teachers engage in an authentic writing style, and in doing so they model for their students the idea, we are all bloggers in this class. Steve and Don said when students observe teachers as authentic bloggers, they are more inclined to take ownership of the process, in other words, to validate its intrinsic worth. They said the failure to validate happens when the blogging activity lacks relevance to students, appearing to be just another classroom exercise but this time online. As described above, both ends of this continuum may be seen at different times in the blogs.

**Theme III: Shortcutting Reason**

The third theme, “shortcutting reason,” emerged while I was trying to answer the third sub-question, What technological aspects do participants encounter during the online activity? Because of the interdependent nature of all of the aspects of the online learning environment, “shortcutting reason” was also prevalent when addressing the first sub-question, how does the cognitive or task dimension evolve online? I did find evidence to the contrary; however, most noticeable in differing degrees across the four online deliberations was a lack of reasoning.
A more reasoned deliberation, one well integrated with fact-based support, is called for by many scholars (Bohman, 1998; Schudson, 1997). Although Gutmann and Thompson (2004) emphasized moral reasoning as deliberation’s primary purpose, Bohman (1998) contended one difficulty of the many theoretical conceptions of a deliberation is its emphasis on moral justification, which leaves too little room for its epistemic role. He argues, “many issues appearing to be moral disagreements, actually turn out to be empirical issues” when moral conflict is made central to a deliberation’s purpose (p. 404).

Nick discovered firsthand the value of Bohman’s contention that the epistemic quality of deliberation should not be relegated to being a byproduct of social learning but rather a “dynamic relationship” between procedures and outcomes. During the interview Nick contended that when his students learned some of the actual provisions of recently passed health care reform laws (i.e., “Obamacare”), the classroom conversation improved. What had been a speculative moral debate about the law’s unfairness became a practical policy classroom discussion on how to lower health care costs. Nick’s blogging procedures emphasized “getting the facts right” but for Parker, factual correctness of an in-class discussion may instead be ascertained by each student during a post-discussion reflective exercise. Bohman (1998) stated equilibrium is necessary in practice. A deliberation must balance epistemic reliability and moral fairness, the “dynamic relationships of procedures in moral deliberation” (p. 405).

In addition to whether students were getting the facts right, I observed across the blogs an overall lack of factual evidence. When I came across disagreement, I often
“heard” students on the blogs echo a call for well-reasoned arguments and more factual evidence from their peers and others (see Table 16). As a result, like Bohman, I began to consider whether the blogging activities placed too much emphasis on moral speculation rather than epistemic issues surrounding a problem.

Table 16

**Student Pleas for More Logic**

**American Issues Blog**  “M, thanks for flipping the table around,” or “while I tend to agree with C and K, and “I think everybody has made good points for both sides.”

**Nick’s Blog**  “Many of those “facts” you posted are not actually facts but are rather speculation.”

**Nick’s Blog**  “It’s pointless to speculate about what could have been because we will never know.”

**Nick’s Blog**  “Your post was good, but you should have used more background information and researched your topic a little more.”

**Tim’s Class Wiki**  “. . . the critique has my vote. Annie’s video strongly exaggerated most of her arguments. For example, she mentioned that 40% of the taxes that we pay goes to the military, when it is only about 20%.” Another student made the common claim, “Either she misinterpreted her research, or perhaps knew she was wrong, and still made the false statements anyway.” It was the alternative, the critique that “won the day” for this common reason: “The critique made better points and had cold, hard evidence to back them.” With the noted exception, students who had clearly appreciated the value of evidence did not apply fact-based reasoning in their own critiques.

**Current Issues Blog**  “So please, I entreat everyone, PLEASE look at the facts (and if not this site, then at least some other actual source). Don’t just make conjectures based on blind emotion.”

*Note.* Students on all four blogs expressed a desire for more complexity in the conversations.

Each blog under study is unique, and I found reasoned arguments developing on all of them (suggesting growth in reasoning as discussed in the next section); however, I also found cases where students frequently went off topic and were uncritical in their thinking. Often when students posted their ideas, I found an abundance of claims of conjecture and opinions unsupported by evidence. I also discovered that use of the
Internet itself had an impact on students’ reasoning patterns. Frequently, I saw students on one blog merely hyperlink to evidence in the place of articulating an argument. The ramifications of this third theme on citizenship education are significant and are explored in chapter 6. At this time I present data that led to this finding by way of two categories through which the theme emerged (see Table 17). Reasoning was short circuited when students went off topic and did not “listen” to each other, as well as when there was little disagreement or argumentation.

Table 17

*Characteristics of Shortcutting Reason*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topical distraction</td>
<td>Misinformation uncritically accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topical distraction</td>
<td>Lack of evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topical distraction</td>
<td>Disconnected, cursory remarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of deliberative complexity</td>
<td>Lack of true difference; lack of disagreement; repetitiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of deliberative complexity</td>
<td>Use of logical fallacies or failure to pinpoint fallacies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of deliberative complexity</td>
<td>Using hyperlink instead of making argument; cursory conversation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Topical Distraction Undermined Reasoning**

Topical distraction describes the online conversations where students were oftentimes not listening then going off topic, an indication of distracted reasoning. I show how this idea first surfaced in teachers’ interviews and then via the blogs themselves.
Teacher evidence of topical distraction. The initial interviews with all of the teachers confirmed the challenge of getting their students to embrace a topic and to listen carefully, the important first step in reasoning.

Steve brought topical distraction to my attention during our interview about the American Issues Blog:

Oftentimes when I do a blog post I pose a question at the end, something that I really want them to respond directly to. Because, again, the medium is something that needs to be handled carefully. Some of these kids are not used to reading long form. Sometimes they skip over certain things. Sometimes they write what they want to write as opposed to responding to something that is being directed at them. (Steve & Don, personal interview, July 23, 2011)

Tim, in our initial interview, also indicated how his students sometimes just don’t read the questions thoroughly (Tim, personal interview, June 15, 2011).

I feel that it is difficult for students to go from the typical question-response that they are used to in schools and instead engage in an ongoing dialogue about controversial issues. Many still just answer the original prompt without considering the other discussion posts. However, there has been some dialogue; I believe there was more during the 2008 election season since most students had a relatively good grasp of the issues involved.

The challenge to attract and retain student attention for an extended period of time came as no surprise to any of the teachers I interviewed. Frank indicated that getting students to focus online would be at least as challenging as keeping their attention in the
classroom. Developing listening skills was an underlying reason he blogged, and I saw how he modeled its importance. Frank maintained a presence during the blogging conversation, posting six times to the conversation under study. He contributed to active listening by challenging students to rebut his points. His students not only responded but they also imitated his techniques of asking for more information or indicating they heard another speaker.

Such was the case when Linda blogged her appreciation to another student:

“Thank you, Jamie, for bringing up a good point that appears to be lacking in many of the arguments in blogs posted by numerous students.” Linda showed that she not only appreciated Jamie’s well-developed argument, a sign of listening, she seemed to be encouraging others to back their arguments. In another instance, Frank posted:

Gloria, I agree with you. There exists as much racism for legal immigrants as there is for illegals. America does not always embrace those who are different. I wonder how many Americans feel equal contempt for legal and illegal immigrants to the US.

Frank, through modeling a challenge to Gloria, showed how he wanted all of his students to support their claims, and by doing so to think critically while maintaining civility. “Listen, and learn” is Frank’s emphasis in blogging, indicating the importance listening has on reasoning. I saw his students listening, although not consistently. Frank shared how he wanted students to improve, “to read other people’s posts.” As a strategy he suggested, “I make them respond more than I make them have original posts” (Frank, personal interview, July 21, 2011).
All of the teachers emphasized the importance of an engaged blogging activity; however, invariably some students listened, while others tuned out, and the tuning out led to shortcutting reasoning. I next describe students’ tendencies toward distraction found on the blogs themselves.

**Blogging evidence of topical distraction.** Upon immersion in the online conversations, I regularly spotted a lack of focus and thus a lack of reasoning. I identified three detractors that tended to derail a deliberation or take it on a tangent. Some conversations were lengthy, multiple-part questions were sometimes confusing, and sub-questions often were unanswered by many students. Across three of four blogs students agreed without building arguments (see Table 18).

Table 18

*Topical Distraction Leading to Shortcuts in Reasoning*

**Nick’s Blog** Students did not fully answer Nick’s question:

1) Which one of the 5 democratic values above is the most important ones in today’s difficult economic times? Why?

   A typical student response:
   
   I agree with you. I agree with your idea that the more we continue to ignore the government and its powers, the more rights and liberties we could lose. I also agree with you that the government should not raise taxes on people with the smallest incomes… they cannot afford less money than what they have now.

**Tim’s Class Wiki**

Student 1: The muslims don’t believe in bad things, Joe.

   Student 2: that’s not always true Lee.

   Student 3: Well then. Why do we have to build it in New York City? They should just have it somewhere else.

   Student 4: It’s the freed of their religion. They should be able to build their place of worship wherever they want.

**Current Issues Blog** I agree with you Steve. It seems wrong that legal immigrants have to take citizenship tests while the children of illegal immigrants do not. I definitely think that the US immigration policies can sometimes be pretty flawed.
First, I noticed that by the end of a long conversation reasoning suffered as many students lost focus. I found students did not always listen to the teacher’s question prompts or their classmates’ responses that followed. Indicators of distracted students appeared as perfunctory posts or as students repeating similar claims without evidence or explanation. After the Current Issues conversation had been underway, a handful of students posted comments but added little new to the long-running conversation. This conversation had many strands of random policy arguments, speculative suggestions about how to fix the problem, as if taking a vote or putting in their two cents worth. Oftentimes these claims were repeated from an idea made in a previous comment and usually in agreement.

Second, I found logical pitfalls when multiple-part questions confused some students while distracting others away from the conversation’s flow and toward a different premise. When students had not fully considered all parts of the teacher’s questions, they typically followed the main ideas in the preceding comments. When distracted from the teacher’s original idea that was oftentimes inferentially embedded within sub-questions, students went off topic or barely responded. Again, perfunctory posts were common. When side conversations, speculation, and abbreviated comments accumulated one after the other, the bulk of them made a long conversation difficult to follow. On Tim’s Class Wiki, students seemed confused about who said what in a long conversation, and I saw this on all the blogs, in varying measures. Also, students might lose interest if they had to read two pages of these, as required.
Finally, I observed reasoning detours when students avoided the more difficult “why” sub-questions and oftentimes avoided considering the underlying causation of a controversy. Frequently students provided a brief sentence or fragment of agreement but did not justify why they agree. Students did not frequently ask the commenter, “Why do you feel that way?”

One discussion on Nick’s Blog stood out that illustrates each of these three detractors to reasoning (see Figure 7). I previously identified that Nick’s counter-factual questioning strategy was challenging for his students, who did not appear to have the

**Figure 7** Henry (H) claims background information and research are missing yet provides no evidence.
requisite background information. As a result, student comments veered off track, failed to address underlying aspects, or wound up in pure conjecture. Nick told me his students tended to overlook several historical controversies embedded within his many posted questions, so I investigated.

In one example Nick asks students, “What if Japan had not surrendered after the 2nd atomic bomb on Nagasaki?” Nick’s purposes behind this and sub-questions were never considered by his students. Nick implied students might consider many ideas including the sub-question, “Did we have another atomic bomb? What then?” The first student planted the idea early that “We did not have another bomb to use” (see Figure 8) and once planted, it took root virtually unchallenged. Almost every comment that followed ignored the possibility of dropping a third atomic weapon. Throughout the 58 comments, students had resigned themselves to a single option for ending World War II, a Japanese land invasion. Not until the middle of a long conversation did one student write, “We did not have another bomb to scare them with until 2 months after, and by the time that was around, our soldiers would have been too far in.” The information presented as facts in this blogging conversation went virtually unchallenged but for one student who commented early on, “Your post was good but you should have used more background information and researched the topic a little more.” In this conversational example basic fact checking as well as essential ideas regarding Cold War tensions remained untouched once students, distracted, blindly followed the first errant comments.
Lack of Deliberative Complexity Undermined Reasoning

Deliberative complexity entails the depth and breadth of reasoning I found within each blogging conversation and it was lacking across the blogs. Relevant characteristics I observed included the duration of conversations, the amount of agreement versus disagreement, the structure of arguments, the length of posts, the use of standard English (as opposed to texting jargon), and the amount or type of supporting evidence. From these characteristics, two categories evolved that indicated reasoning was short circuited: repetitive comments during widespread agreement as well as faulty logic and unsupported claims. In the following descriptions, I show specific indicators were prevalent on some more than others, but a general lack of evidence was noticeable across the blogs.

Repetitive claims showed lack of complexity. Common across the blogs, I saw the students’ propensity toward agreement, which suggests little depth of cognitive reasoning. I identified this as *parroting* on Nick’s Blog and as *like mindedness* on the American Issues and Current Issues blogs.

When a student repeated an idea, adding nothing new, I labeled these comments as *parroting*, and on Nick’s Blog, in particular (see Figure 8), I often found that individually students were quick to decide but did not fully weigh all sides of an issue. This manifests in an abundance of terse comments that mimic a previous response—sometimes verbatim. Included in this description was how these parroted comments appeared at the conversation’s end and added little to the interactivity. As a result, some
Figure 8. Parroting behavior is found on Nick’s Blog. Students’ claims, those arguing for invasion, and those against the Iraq invasion. Note: Seven claims were coded as neutral: •We would still have military in Afghanistan, •Bush may or may not be elected., •Saddam would have had to be taken care of eventually., •Al Qaeda would have gone away eventually., We would have still been angry and tried to attack Afghanistan., •Bush would be criticized either way., •War, postponed, would be inevitable. One student posed the essential claim, “It’s pointless to speculate.”
discussions took on this appearance of a worksheet, yet the presence of parroting did not necessarily characterize the entire discussion.

While observing the conversation, I considered how the repetition transpired and found more evidence of reasoning in the early comments than in the later posts. Some students might engage actively within clustered posts and sometimes repeated an idea so they appeared to weigh in. It was obvious when students were plagiarizing; I subcategorized this parroting type as leeching. In the language of media piracy, a seeder is often a magnanimous technophile who uploads a large media file for sharing, while a leecher connects to the file and waits for the media to download. When new music or movie is released, a clever pirate will not leech right away, but instead will wait until there are enough seeders online to hasten a download. The metaphor is apt. Whereas the early comments, those posted by seeders, were more likely to add a new premise, leechers waited until nearer the deadline.

I illustrate shortcutting reason via parroting as it appeared during Nick’s most controversial posting, a conversation about the invasion of Iraq. Students in this conservative school district had various ideas about the war in Iraq. When asked the question, “What if President Bush had not invaded Iraq?” the collection of arguments reflected many that have been in the public square for nearly a decade. By the end of the 44 posts, students seemingly had exhausted the list of possibilities. Students made many claims throughout this discussion, but rarely developed their arguments. Students posted many times in a long blogging conversation as I illustrate in Figure 8 with each entry representing a single claim by a student. The figure shows students were
influenced by prompts, “What would have been the impact on American foreign policy and economics leading up to the 2004 election and his second term?” and “Respond to one peer by Fri June 3rd!” Nick influenced the conversation with sub-questions directing students toward issues of foreign relations and economic speculations—and to getting the work done. As a result, students appeared focused upon getting the work done.

When I listed the students’ many claims, the total responses for and against the war in Iraq were exhaustive but not deep. Many students had balanced competing claims, and in doing so, revealed to others they had considered both sides of an issue. What they had not done is supported their claims with researched evidence. By the end of the conversation the claims had become common. The justifications that followed were typically short. Five students remarked that Al Qaeda (whom we know controls Afghanistan) would now be in control of Iraq had we not invaded. This made me question, had they confused the war in Iraq with the war in Afghanistan, or were they reciting a controversial claim they heard earlier? In the public forum, few argue that Saddam had connections to Al Qaeda, and in this conversation, there was no evidence to support such a claim. Evidence in the public sphere is scant so I assumed students may have heard this claim in the news or at home, or on a Fox News headline feed, or from a prior post on this blog. This assumption was validated by students’ frequent confused use of facts, including three students who stated Saddam Hussein was Iran’s leader. Students were not making a stand on a controversial issue; rather, they were parroting misinformation.
Students infrequently questioned inaccuracies and for this reason, this blogging discussion failed to live up to Nick’s expectations in regards to the complexity of the deliberation. When students did present a challenge, it was apparent. For instance Jerry challenged misinformation by claiming, “There is no Al Qaeda in Iraq.” However, specific arguments, such as “Did Hussein have ties to Al Qaeda?” or “Did Saddam have nuclear weapons?” were notably absent from this conversation. The conversation did, however, have value, Nick told me. It provided valuable insights into the progress of the class and students. Nick’s blogging activity showed him how his students’ argumentation skills were developing. With these insights he might better direct his in-class activities. Yet these classroom corrections must not have been enough, according to Nick, who told me toward the end of the year he began to deduct points for lack of critical thinking. He told me he hoped sharpening the assessment might facilitate a more nuanced conversation. Nick indicated his blogging activity was a work in progress, both for him and his students.

Different than parroting, the other indicator of students agreeing online, like mindedness, involved a more complex type of comment but still did not demand reasoning required of differing perspectives. I identified like mindedness as repeated claims using slightly different evidence, oftentimes well-reasoned and carefully articulated but still accepting information somewhat uncritically. This phenomenon reminded me of a panel discussion or seminar and was prevalent on the Current Issues Blog and others.
In some instances a conversation was complex and had the appearance of disagreement but in truth the students were mostly in agreement with only nuanced differences. I found many instances on the Current Issues Blog where students were arguing in the weeds, so to speak. In other words, they agreed on the major idea (i.e., we have a problem with illegal immigrants) but had various justifications for sending illegal immigrants home. A handful of students were debating their rhetorical tactics more than they were arguing about the controversy. Conversations like these had the appearance of intensity.

Fueling a highly energized conversation, a provocative discussion such as the one I saw on the Current Issues Blog illustrates how competitive students can stoke passion and in so doing inspire careful consideration. Despite the lively debate, however, I noted throughout a high degree of agreement on the major premise rendering this topic less controversial than it appeared. Students had “researched” legal issues (i.e., Constitutional matters), they had evaluated moral reasoning (i.e., legal claims that might be “condoning racism”), and they offered many practical policy fixes, such as suggesting “slight reversals of the law.”

**Faulty logic and unsupported claims detracted from deliberative complexity.** On a few occasions I observed students across the blogs using skilled reasoning; more times than not, though, fallacies went undetected and undermined the deliberation. For instance, one student pointed out the hasty generalization of another, saying “not every American is Christian.” Others went unquestioned such as this *ad
hominem attack, “it is pretty obvious that you are a loose activist,” a pejorative term in a constitutional conversation.

In addition to overlooking logical fallacies, many participants across the blogs constructed arguments with little evidence (see Table 19). Many unsupported claims were posted on Nick’s Blog as I described above in the conversation about Iraq. During the immigration conversation on the Current Issues Blog, some students found it more convincing to dismiss evidence altogether. One student said, “First of all, I’m not gonna throw statistics at you, because they’re flawed, and you can find statistics directly contradicting mine.” Likewise, another made a preemptive strike with, “or legal jibberish you may throw at me,” dismissing any rebuttal that may contain facts.

Multiple cases surfaced, however, where students within the blogging activities demanded more by way of deliberation such as this student, who, during the immigration conversation, wrote:

Table 19

Short Circuiting Reasoning Found Across Blogging Conversations

American Issues Blog “I think the main goal schools should have is to give [emphasis added] students the ability and the desire to continue learning throughout life . . .”[statement contradicts facts that strongest motivation comes from within; cannot be “given”]

Nick’s Blog “No matter what any president or politician does they will be criticized.” [hasty generalization]

Tim’s Class Wiki “Alex why would you want this? All the things I looked up about this Muslim Cultural Center it says bad things about it & how it’s going to put the American troops in danger. If that’s going to happen theres no reason to build it.” [unsupported claims]

Current Issues Blog “people in America are racist because they treat immigrants badly.” [hasty generalization]
For all those who are claiming that illegal immigrants are a drain on taxpayers’ money and government money (which is just about everyone), will you please take a moment to actually listen to some facts as opposed to just writing biased views based off of even more biased sources? . . . So please, I entreat everyone, PLEASE look at the facts (and if not this site, then at least some other actual source). Don’t just make conjectures based on blind emotion. Sources used: Wikipedia, American Bar Association, Center for American Progress, BlogCritics: Politics, American Immigration Lawyers Association. [hyperlink embedded]

In voicing frustration with the class’s overly simplistic deliberation, this student expected her classmates both to “listen” better and to use better reasoning skills—the very aspects discussed in this section that overviews cognitive shortcuts. She ends by embedding a hyperlink to what she claims is a credible source. This student used the Internet to bolster her argument, but I also saw how for others the technology was a barrier to reasoning.

I observed that the technological dimension of the online class discussion sometimes negatively affected the complexity of the deliberation in two ways, ineffectual use of hyperlinks and limited interactivity. When students embedded hyperlinks and relied largely on those links to make their arguments, they used the Internet as a crutch and thus missed an opportunity to practice skills of reasoning. Some students used Internet links to avoid having to construct an argument at all. Conversely, students typically did not use the digital information at their fingertips in the online
classroom to support claims or to check facts. Lastly, if interactivity was limited or non-existent, reasoned deliberation was likewise curtailed.

The above phenomena were most prevalent in Tim’s Class Wiki, where Tim unintentionally modeled using technology as a crutch by depending on links to initiate a deliberation (see Figure 9). In like fashion, most students participated in the deliberation not by articulating cogent arguments but by leaning on links to do it for them such as the case in this example: “I think that if we put a mosque on ground zero it will make other Muslims feel at peace. If we don’t there could be another terrorist attack. President Obama supports the idea of the mosque [link provided].” I found an even more extreme case when one student used this for a refutation: “The Muslims don’t believe in bad things, Linda” and embedded a hyperlink rather than articulating any supporting evidence. Typically students leveraged Internet information in this deliberation, using a site url as a crutch and rarely referencing supporting evidence in their arguments (e.g.,

**Figure 9.** Tim uses technology as a shortcut.
“This video has some comments that i think will explain more of what is happening.”). When referencing a url, students rarely used facts from what they read.

On Tim’s Class Wiki I could tell that students understood what effective reasoning looks like but had a difficult time applying its formal conventions. When students were asked to view and respond to arguments made in two videos, they disagreed sharply with the argument in one video, “The Story of Stuff,” an animated online video about over-consumption that was produced by Annie Leonard. Tim used another video that critiqued Leonard’s story to provide alternative evidence, and students fell in line with the critique’s main argument—another example of like mindedness.

Most every student found “The Story of Stuff” unconvincing because of, as one student put it, Leonard’s shortage of “hard facts.” Ironically, all but one student stated their claims without using any evidence, thus falling victim to the very thing they were criticizing. To address this shortfall, Tim began including activities that had students synthesize what they read online. For instance he asked students, “Post one objective and one biased form of media regarding a particular news item below. Explain your reasoning behind each source.” Tim was trying to counter the tendency of students who allowed links to speak and think for them.

In addition to allowing links to speak for them, students also called upon the digital resources to think for them. When students used web links to back their arguments, they oftentimes did not connect the dots. In other words, they either were
not actually synthesizing the information or they simply were not presenting the synthesis in their blog entry.

Another tendency regarding technology was that, while students freely utilized hyperlinks to show support for their statement, they rarely used the infinite resources of the Internet to fact check or challenge others in the deliberation. This was most evident on Nick’s blogging activity when Nick posed the counter-factual question, “What if Japan had not surrendered after the 2nd atomic bomb on Nagasaki?” Within this prompt Nick suggested, “Remember Stalin was angry over not being told about USA possession of the bomb.” No one questioned Nick’s assertions that Stalin was not told about the bomb and, if not told, that he was angry. Interpreting historical fact is controversial, but Nick told me he wanted his students to think like historians, and the tools to do so are a mouse click away. Students took the tools for granted as support for an argument.

Finally, I found on Tim’s Class Wiki throughout the year that students did not really interact as much as they were simply answering the questions, falling short of a reasoned deliberation. The challenge of generating interaction among students is a disadvantage of the time-space difference of the online classroom. However, some students leveraged the advantages of the Internet, and in the next section I show examples of that along with other evidence that shows the blogging activities were deliberative crucibles, despite a seeming absence of reason.

In this final section, I propose a model for online deliberation generated on these social studies blogs.
A Model of Online Deliberation

Although the bulk of the data pointed to reasoning shortcuts, I found evidence across the blogs that students are growing in terms of developing abilities of reasoning (see Table 20), and this evolution is significant in moving toward an online deliberation.

Table 20

Reasoning Developing Across Blogging Conversations

American Issues Blog Emma argued, “If the moral of this whole story with the Koran burning is that we shouldn’t blame an entire religion for the doings of one group, Islamic extremists should not be blaming Christianity for the doings of the US. Not every American is Christian, and the United States is operated secularly.” She highlighted the logical fallacy that David presented, a hasty generalization. Her statement, “not every American is Christian” was reasoning that could be inferentially applied back to Carolyn’s comment. Carolyn did not state why the Pastor Jones’ incident would make Muslims angrier, but Emma answers the “why” question essentially arguing that Muslim’s will overgeneralize as well. Reasoning skills provide answers to the “why” question in an argument.

Nick’s Blog “Al-Qaeda had nothing to do with Iraq. They only started arriving AFTER we did. They wouldn’t have viewed us as weak if we didn’t invade, as they were already fighting us in Afghanistan.”

Tim’s Class Wiki “Annie’s video strongly exaggerated most of her arguments. For example, she mentioned that 40% of the taxes that we pay goes to the military, when it is only about 20%.”

Current Issues Blog “But whether or not they are eligible for welfare shouldn’t even matter because these illegal immigrants broke the law to get here in the first place. Also, we are allowed to impose a double standard on those who wish to enter our country vs. those who are already here. Clearly saying that a child must earn 125% of the poverty line income to sponsor his/her parents for citizenship is different from the restrictions placed on people who are already citizens, many of whom live well beneath the poverty line.

It’s kind of like a university saying that you must meet certain expectations to be admitted, but once you’re in you can do whatever you want (i.e. fail). It’s just to prove that you are capable of contributing to the environment.”

Signs of reasoning include those structures of logic I expected to see in an argument.

When considering the cognitive or task aspect of these blogging activities, as a former debate coach I was cognizant of formal argumentation skills. Parts of an effective argument would follow the Toulmin model with a claim, warrant, modality and backing, in other words, reasoning literacy. Signs of reasoning include considering diverse
perspectives, using supporting evidence, and avoiding or pointing out logical fallacies.

One student on the Current Issues Blog shows such reasoning skills in calling out another’s weak argument: “nice arguement…NOT it lacks any concrete evidence that anything you have said would ever happen you are using a slippery slope arguement..”.

What I observed across all four blogs was an informal approach to deliberation, one that allowed fluctuations based on the educational context. After an elaborate process of refining categories, I identified among the high school blogs five types of online conversations: online worksheet, online bull session, online seminar, online debate, and online deliberation, which are illustrated in Figure 10 and explained next.

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**Figure 10.** A model for online deliberation emerged from the data.
The model is a draft that illustrates the range of conversations along two dimensions, authenticity and decisiveness, as introduced and described earlier in this chapter. It is important to underscore that since deliberation is a process rather than a product, the five types are neither stagnant nor discrete. The arrow in the model represents the evolving nature of an online conversation that has the potential of becoming progressively more complex and, ideally, deliberative. In other words, a single blog potentially could resemble all five types at different times during the semester.

Since the very act of deliberation enhances skills of reasoning (Burkhalter et al., 2002), I have observed that each type of online conversation brings some value to the social studies classroom. Next, I describe the five types before concluding this section with evidence I found throughout the blogging activities that such online activities foster reasoning literacy.

**Online Worksheet**

As described earlier in this chapter, Nick’s Blog often resembled an efficient conversation, and I identified that this type of deliberation is an *online worksheet*. Worksheet-like discussions, primarily on Nick’s Blog and Tim’s Class Wiki were clearly identifiable by a high level of decisiveness and parroted postings, which suggest little authenticity. At its best, the online worksheet is useful in the context of learning important background information. At its worst, it suggests rote memorization or recitation.

The online worksheet represents a conversation not with careful consideration
Table 21

Types of Online Deliberation on Current Issues Blog

Online Worksheet

Saba: I think that illegal immigrants should not be able to come to the US because they are not real American citizens therefore, they shouldn't be able to be here. Simple as that.

Online Bull Session

Greg: I do not know what I'm writing about..lol [nonsensical filler]

Brandon: No, I think it's bad back qudd at the same time cause ppl deserve rights and on another note it's bad 4 the country cuz it could over crowded [nonsensical filler]

[In the midst of well-reasoned arguments addressing various aspects of immigration, Maria interjects repeatedly with unsupported claims thus moving the deliberative activity toward a bull session.]

Maria: Immigrants are treated badly in America. They deserve to be treated just like everyone else. They come to this country to make something out of themselves, not to hurt anyone. They want to experience the American dream.

Maria: People in America are racist because they treat immigrants badly.

Shrigya: But Gloria, what about immigrants who break the law to come here? Shouldn't they be deported?

Maria: But Americans treat immigrants poorly just because they weren't born in America.

Online Seminar

Cassie: Immigration benefits our country if done legally. When I was adopted at age 5 from Vladimir, Russia, I experienced my own sense of immigration. Every day I am thankful for being granted certain privileges and freedoms that were not found in Russia. However, unlike numerous illegal immigrants today, I did gain my U.S. citizenship legally, through swearing on an oath and through passing a citizenship that tested my knowledge of this country. Our country was built upon immigrants from a variety of European countries and undeniably, without them, business would not have been built and the country would have . . .

Online Debate

Zach: I have to agree with Mr. Bigcity . . . it's unfair to assume that just because an immigrant is here "illegally" that they are only a drain on the system. Many illegal immigrants do end up paying taxes to the government (an estimated 7 billion to Social Security).

Josh: Sorry Mr. Bigcity I'm going to have to disagree with you on the point that everyone deserves an education. While you are correct that illegal workers pay a great deal of money on paycheck withholdings–close to $9 billion of social security taxes in 2008 alone, the simple fact is, the government and big businesses see the benefits of illegal immigration, not the average person.

but rather with quick judgment (see Table 21) and often with parroting behavior. I investigated the parroting phenomenon on Nick's Blog and when many of these short "parroting" comments appeared in clusters, I grouped these characteristics as online
worksheets. Worksheet-like behaviors are absent of fact-based challenge and more likely to agree with an opinion. I consider this behavior similar to students in the classroom, some who answer accurately but others who show minimal cognitive effort by filling in every answer on a worksheet no matter how nonsensical. Such behavior did not appear to reflect genuine engagement, and I observed instances of it intermittently in many blogging discussions.

I surmised the online worksheets have much of the same characteristics of the initiation-response-evaluation (I-R-E) patterns. A common criticism of the IRE, described in chapter 2, is it lacks interactivity and therefore is not complex. However, Nick finds value in it.

It gives a way of providing feedback for me. Whether they got the facts right. Unlike the classroom debate, they have a chance to think out of the box so to speak. In terms of not just a chance to agree with their peers, which they seem to try do a lot of times. And that’s something I have seen throughout the year on the blog site. They eventually got comfortable with challenging their peers.

To Nick, blogging is a developmental first step to a more engaged conversation in class. Because getting the facts right is essential to any deliberative process, a more lively conversation might ensue in a classroom discussion. Nick told me he recognized problems throughout the discussions that, among other things, students have a propensity to overlook contradictory evidence (e-mail interview, July 25, 2011). However, Nick found value in identifying lapses in student misunderstandings, and with new understandings he could address the issues in class.
Online Bull Session

The online worksheet had some substance, but when I observed more superficial conversations, I labeled them *online bull sessions* and found some evidence of this type albeit sometimes minor in all of the blogs. W. C. Parker (2006) dismissed primarily social occasions in the classroom as “bull sessions” which he stated, “though convivial, have no particular instructional purpose” (p. 12). In other words, he considered that they lack cognitive value. In this way this online phenomenon could be compared to a particular type of classroom talk.

Often distinguishing the online bull session is a lack of substance. This type of activity also shows little decisiveness and little authenticity. In its ideal state, the online bull session is fertile for creative brainstorming. It becomes problematic when the conversation stalls and is a distraction from the problem under examination. During a conversation on the American Issues Blog, for instance, students were discussing what schools should provide (see Figure 3). Some signs of a bull session can be found in the following comment, which was a rare moment of the bull session phenomenon on this forum.

I fell [sic] like all of us get so distracted by the rat race of high school that we don’t know why we even want to go. It’s good to take time like this (if you have any) and reflect on why our education through this system is so important besides reaching post-secondary education. Granted, I am not the best person to be saying this because my current view on high school is how can I get an A on an hourly basis, but that’s not the best thing in the world. I just blogged about
this very same thing and the effects it has on our holiday spirit if you wanna check that out. I think that the competition that the current education system has created isn’t necessarily the best thing, but I don’t know how I would change it.

The student who commented above about school reform added no substance to the conversation but instead emoted about a lack of time and promoted his own blog.

**Online Seminar**

Unlike the previous example, however, the majority of talk on the American Issues Blog resembled an *online seminar*, marked by a high degree of authenticity and a low degree of decisiveness with several individuals discussing various aspects of one or more related topics with or without interaction and without reaching consensus. The online seminar has unique qualities that emerged across the blogs. It is more spontaneous and open-ended. At its worst, this type of blogging activity can marginalize students who disagree, thereby fostering intolerance. Problematically, it sometimes instills bias such as a preponderance of like mindedness. In its ideal I found that this type of blogging refines communication skills.

A good example of a productive online seminar is the bulk of the discussion that ensued from Don’s post about education (see Figure 3) as exemplified by the comment below.

I believe that one of the biggest ways to get to students infused with ‘the substance of genuine learning’ is to create an environment where risk taking (especially inserting a personal voice that might not go strictly along with the rubric) is encouraged. In schools around the country almost every assignment is
given back to students with a final grade. This grade usually represents how well the student followed the rubric or memorized certain facts, but the grade discourages risk taking. If a student strays outside the given parameters then there is a risk of having the grade brought down. ‘Just to be safe’ the students go with the rubric and do not opt to take the risk. This would imply that if each assignment is thought of as a process rather than a deadline the problem can be resolved. If students are given an opportunity to revise their work, and improve their grade then risk taking becomes much less risky. Students can start to feel comfortable to stray away from the rubric, and put into their work a personal voice that might otherwise not have been expressed. This way learning becomes relative to an individual.

Of the seven comments that followed this initial student’s post, all but one echoed the same general thoughts about risk taking and inspiring creativity and lifelong learning. Though the bloggers tended to jump on the bandwagon, they did so eloquently in posts that showed originality of expression. This online seminar format of the American Issues Blog showed that those who posted a comment genuinely wanted to weigh in on the topic and most added substantive ideas to the conversation.

Because the decision-making process leads to conflict, I considered how Steve and Don might be unintentionally avoiding consensus in their blogging activity to avoid conflict. I considered the process of reaching consensus was unlikely when discussions had assumed agreement or when they lacked focus. I did find, however, that the online seminar still served as a lab for developing logical prowess. For instance, on the
American Issues Blog, many students found overgeneralizations problematic, as when David suggested that, “certain middle eastern leaders . . . want a whole people wiped out.” Although no student sought clarification or challenged the validity of his evidence, many students spotted his overgeneralization, including one girl who added the term *religious* to qualify his statement, “certain middle eastern [religious] leaders who want a whole people group wiped out.” No one questions David’s use of facts by asking, “Is it Saddam Hussein you are refereeing to?” No one countered the revised statement with the fact that many consider Hussein a secular leader. Near the end a student summed up the conversation by stating, “I think it’s great that plenty of people are highlighting the fact that not all Muslims are terrorists.” Students were learning what good reasoning looked like but remained reserved about challenging evidence.

**Online Debate**

A wider range of perspectives and more in-depth conversation was found from 12th graders on the Current Issues Blog, which often closely resembled an *online debate*. I define the online debate as highly competitive, procedural, and decisive with a high degree of authenticity. The online debate is problematic when it marginalizes those without access or without the tools or skills to participate, such as the students from New York who appeared withdrawn from the conversation. At its best, however, the online debate maximizes reasoning.

On the Current Issues Blog, students debated more frequently than in other discussions in this study. The conversation about immigration was among the most
complex. In this conversation that lasted over a month, student debates demonstrated a spectrum of reasoning skills as can be seen in Table 22.

Table 22

*Researched Evidence on Current Issues Blog*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“[There is a ] backlog of 1.1 million green card applications, and the typical waiting time was three years.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Illegal workers pay a great deal of money on paycheck withholdings-close to $9 billion of social security taxes in 2008 alone.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I do not believe America could possibly become overcrowded by illegal immigrants. According to the New York Times as of September 1st, there are 12,000,000 illegal immigrants in America . . . with a US population of 307,006,550, illegal immigrants is less than 1% of the US population, what harm can that do?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Most of them still pay income taxes and real estate taxes, which adds up to a total of $162 billion dollars in revenue. So it still is ‘counted’ toward the economy, even if some their wages are sent back to their home country.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“53% of Americans do, and some of those Americans are still receiving refunds somehow, only taking more money out of the economy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Before I begin, I just wanted to state that, according to a study by the Pew Hispanic Center in 2006, 45% of illegal immigrants were students who overstayed their visa. Although this information is four years old, the numbers today are probably not far from different. And of the 19 September 11th hijackers, 6 had overstayed their visas. This is proof that the focus for fighting illegal immigration cannot solely be solved with a fence.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Comments that provided researched evidence as an indicator of reasoning. Students relied less on speculative evidence, more on research—an indication of reasoning. In the final example, reasoning follows the stated evidence.

Clashes were more frequent in this blogging conversation than the other activities, with much of debate primarily focused on the issues of “anchor babies.” This law allows for the children of illegal immigrants to remain in the United States, and most students commonly argued about the law’s unfairness.
Six students were more actively engaged than others in the arguments about immigration and the fairness of the anchor baby provision, which they commonly contended “is WRONG” based in large part on the law. In good measure, I observed these students reading previous comments, interacting, and engaging thus developing their argumentation skills. I identified these patterns when students found needed evidence and went beyond the requirements of the assignment. These students also supported their legal claims with empirical and historical research that showed both content knowledge and reasoning skills as illustrated by one student’s remark, pointing out a logical fallacy in a lengthy refutation another had proffered:

I’m glad that you, like any other AP Gov student, can cite the provisions of the 14th Amendment and the history before and after its passage. I was certainly aware of all the facts that you kindly provided above when I posted my comment. Unfortunately, most of your posts about black history are irrelevant to the issue at hand.

Like these two students, many others in Frank’s classes appeared competitive in this online debate. One student claimed: “It is definitely valid to say that we cannot afford illegal immigrants in the country right now . . . it’s frustrating that an illegal immigrant can be ‘exempt’ from taxes but still feed off of and thrive from American tax dollars.” Another student rebutted,

If I understand you correctly, you’re claiming that illegal immigrants are completely exempt from taxes. I can assure you this is a blatant lie . . . Roughly
8 million illegal immigrants pay taxes just like the rest of us. About two-thirds of illegal immigrants pay Medicare, Social Security and personal income taxes. As students clashed, I saw their reasoning skills develop, and I detail this growth shortly. On this blog students crafted well-researched defenses.

**Online Deliberation**

Although many portions of the Current Issues Blog resembled an online debate, at its finest the entirety of the month-long conversation took on the nature of what I have identified as the *online deliberation*, which balances authenticity and procedure, careful consideration and decisiveness. This precarious balance is what I call the *Zone of Optimal Reasoning* (ZOR). When a blogging activity approaches this state, it begins generating authentic voices, dialogic civility, reasoned arguments, diverse perspectives, critical thinking, and group decision-making.

Though neither sustained nor entirely diverse, reasoned arguments are evident throughout the Current Issues Blog (see Table 23) and may at times be observed across Table 23

**Developing Abilities of Reasoning**

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**American Issues Blog**

David: “certain middle eastern leaders who want a whole people wiped out.”

Joe: “I think it’s great that plenty of people are highlighting the fact that not all Muslims are terrorists that is one of the most important parts of this news story.”

**Current Issues Blog** Mark, how does that make sense? “A newborn child should be punished for their parents wrong doing?” If everyone were to go by this logic, if your parents were to be convicted of murder, for example, this is saying you should be sent to jail as well.

The price we pay for illegal immigration has been highlighted numerous times by my peers…… What’s the immigrant experience in America? It’s intellectual sloth to attempt to define it; the idea of the immigrant experience is entirely subjective, can be used to highlight the virtues of both pro and anti 14th Amendment supports, and is therefore fallacious in this debate

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the other blogs as well. For example, the American Issues Blog suddenly became deliberative in nature when one parent weighs in on a previously mentioned conversation about school reform by providing a different perspective, subtle disagreement, and solid reasoning. Additionally, Steve told me the students in American Issues reflect weekly in class and they also journal about the process once a semester. I realized in this way they were following the deliberative prescription that aims toward decisiveness through reflection in lieu of reaching procedural consensus or a formal group decision (McMurray, 2007; W. C. Parker, 2006).

To provide richer insights into the Current Issues Blog, I share the following account that showed signs of a conversation metamorphosing into an online deliberation. Reasoned arguments were evident among a half dozen students, in particular, who thought critically and explored various aspects of the issue. The debate among these students, who from their names I suspect may all be male, escalated as student rebuttals gained in both empirical complexity and emotional intensity each appearing eager to prove who knew more. What these students commonly described as a “policy loophole” of the anchor baby law was never in contention. What was in dispute was each other’s legal and practical remedies and the reasoning behind such suggestions. For instance, one student’s practical solution of making illegals “compensate for their crime, [then] they can apply for legal residency” met with a host of challenges. One student questioned, “how exactly [do] you plan to make the parents ‘face the consequences’ of illegal residency.” Another claimed any remedy would be “a further drain on the country’s economy.”
One insightful student wrote, “The rebuttal to the claim that the 14th Amendment is closed to debate is in itself closed-minded,” and he recommended “a slight modification” of the law. He also provoked deeper thought and a different way of looking at the issue when he wrote sarcastically about “[migrants] finding a lovely job picking tomatoes for 10 dollars a day.” This student’s reasoning begins to motivate others to consider vastly different views, including a caring perspective. Thus the nature of the conversation began to take on more characteristics of an online deliberation as can be seen when Sue fully introduces the humanistic perspective:

That still doesn’t make it ethical to rip a child’s parents away from him/her, especially if the child is determined to be given citizenship, but not the parents.
Yes, some aren’t discovered, but for those that are, a serious moral dilemma arises.

It took true difference, broadly speaking a humanistic perspective rather than a legal one, to change the nature of this online debate to a more deliberative kind. The legal issues became secondary to the moral issues after Sue’s point and were seen throughout the month-long conversation. This, rather than the legal perspective, became the premise for Jan’s defense of the anchor baby law:

It doesn’t change the fact that they’re breaking the law, and I’m not trying to condone or justify their actions, but we should at least consider the human aspect of this whole situation, not just the economic or governmental aspects.

Clearly, Sue had changed the nature of the arguments to follow. Now, even those who argued against her premise, like Jan, attended to questions of morality:
Sue, while I do agree that we need to take into account the human aspects of deportation and separation of the parents of illegal children from their kids, I think it’s also important to note that these parents, these illegal immigrants who are making the decision to cross the border, to pick up an alternate life constantly running from the law, must understand the consequences that are attached to their actions. Spending your entire life running from the law because your parents are illegal is just as unfair and unjust as having to spend your life jumping between two homes and two families because your parents are divorced. But just because it’s unfair or unjust doesn’t mean it can’t or shouldn’t be law. You can’t choose the family that you’re born into and as parents; they should realize that they risk separation from their children if they cross the border. And I know that may sound horrifically harsh, but if rules and guidelines were not set in place, then America would be completely run over by illegal immigrants and there would be little order.

Jan addressed both a caring and a rules-based perspective.

Other students added to the conversation, some even in support of the anchor baby law provision but mostly all in agreement on the main conclusion, illegal immigration and anchor babies are wrong. However, the fact that differing perspectives were brought to the table, caring and legal, added to the complexity of this deliberation. Students who previously posted did not inure, but rather tried to add a human perspective to their previous justifications. For example, Mark re-entered the debate, “Anyway, I do recognize the reasons that parents would have anchor babies (to be given
a better life, and blah, blah, blah, more pathos). Paul did the same and doubled-down on his conclusion, “Call me insensitive, [which we should consider] but this is what should be done.” Finally, Jerry injected more concern and information into his argument:

Really Zach, I do have empathy, but according to rense.com, Coyotes dealing in human traffic are paid $1,500.00 to $25,000.00 per person to shuttle pregnant illegal aliens across our southern border. Now please tell me how this dangerous human trafficking benefits the children in any way?

The rhetoric changed, but had these unyielding students deliberated? A group deliberation sometimes homogenizes attitudes and sometimes polarizes them (Kardia & Sevig, 2001) so I considered what other students, onlookers who were required to read the entire transcript, might think. Jeannie provided some indication that an online debate was useful to her deliberative thinking, by stating, “I have the same sort of internal debate going on in my head and can’t really make a good decision that solves everything.” She appeared to be struggling with the moral consequences of a policy decision and its human implications, “I know why the immigrants do what they do, they want a better future for themselves and they’re kids. In my opinion, immigrants can help and hurt america.”

In her reflection, Jeannie revealed an evolution of reasoning by admitting how difficult it is to make a moral decision. The online assignment did not require a consensus, which may or may not be to Jeannie’s benefit. Should students have to make
a decision in a deliberative classroom activity? The question itself emerges as a significant implication of this study and is considered in the final chapter.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have described and explained three themes and a draft model of online deliberation that emerged from a grounded theory study of four high school social studies blogs while attempting to answer research questions that essentially asked, “What is the nature of this phenomenon?” My findings about these hybrid deliberative activities can be summed up in the three themes of (a) conversation over consensus, (b) dynamic tension between authenticity and procedure, and (c) shortcutting reason. Together, these themes suggest an evolution of the concept and practice of deliberation. The draft model I put forth validates the process of a more informal online deliberation in its many variations.

My deep exploration of the nature of these blogs considered the cognitive or task, social, and technological dimensions. Categories emerged from the data within each sphere—many, it is important to remember, overlapping two or all three dimensions. Cross-case analyses of the blogs served to solidify these categories. In chapter 6, I further discuss the findings, giving special consideration to the potential ramifications for the social studies classroom, the trustworthiness of the study, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

With most indicators showing a decline in civic engagement over the last half century (Putnam, 2000), many scholars have turned their attention to the Internet for its potential to provide a democracy-building communication vehicle unhindered by traditional limitations (Coleman & Gotze, 2001; Dahlberg, 2007; Dahlgren, 2005). Though not a panacea, Internet-based social practices are being studied as an antidote to apathy. Digital deliberation, in particular, has become the focus of a skein of research, all of it connected by the overarching theory of deliberative democracy—the belief that a healthy democracy relies upon vigorous debate about public issues (Dewey, 1954). In a deliberative democracy, “a heterogeneous collection of citizens with diverse opinions come together in the ‘public realm’ to engage in structured debate, free of coercion, to reach considered judgments about an issue of common good” (Ginsborg, 2008, p. 59).

Inspired by watching high school debaters preparing online arguments, I wondered if an online discussion might have possibilities in social studies classrooms. Later, in graduate school, I was further intrigued by two social studies teachers whose students blogged about controversial issues. A review of the literature revealed very little has been studied concerning online deliberative practices in the high school social studies classroom.

The technology revolution of the 21st century has contributed to an increase in deliberative citizenship activity albeit online. Recent signs of online citizen influence
include the choice of “The Protester” as *Time* magazine’s “Person of the Year” for 2011. From uprisings in Egypt and Syria during the so-called Arab spring to sit-ins throughout the U.S. as part of the “Occupy Wall Street” movement, citizen engagement and efficacy has been inspired and increased by the likes of Twitter and other social networking tools. A hyper-engaged citizenry also can be seen in the corporate sector, where online customer protest in 2011 convinced Bank of America, Netflix, and Verizon all to reverse decisions about adding fees or changing services.

More than half of all Americans have been online for at least a decade, populating this new digital public square where public issues are increasingly being deliberated. Americans are increasingly spending Internet time communicating with others, with 36% of their time engaging in social networks, blogs, personal e-mail, and instant messaging (Nielson, 2010). Some 39% of those using social networks go there to express themselves and their views (Experian Simmons, 2010). Political discussions taking place online are thought to increase political engagement and empowerment of marginalized groups in society (Vergeer & Hermans, 2008).

All of that notwithstanding, this research has prompted the question: What is the nature of the deliberation generated on four issues-centered blogs used in the high school social studies classroom? My research study indicated an evolution of the deliberative concept. Commonly, the blogging activities I investigated lean away from reasoned decision-making and toward an informal “carefully reasoned conversation.” This led me to the question, how likely are students to carefully reason online, particularly when the activity is a compulsory informal conversation? Because I am
finding the concept of an informal deliberation is changing rapidly online outside of the classroom, an evolved definition might guide a teacher’s own deliberative understandings. In particular, a classroom deliberation has many outside influences and I have found the technology itself is central. Thus the need for digital citizenship education presents itself among the priorities of today’s social studies classroom (Crowe, 2006; Kubey, 2004; Swan & Hofer, 2008). That need and my own experiences motivated this research study.

In the previous chapter I presented findings from an in-depth analysis of four online social studies class deliberative activities. In this chapter I review the purpose, research questions, and findings of my study. Then, I discuss the findings as they pertain to prior research. Next, I consider implications for the classroom as well as limitations and trustworthiness of the study. I conclude by providing recommendations for future research.

**Summary of the Research**

As introduced in chapter 1, the purpose of this grounded theory study was to observe online discussions assigned in high school social studies classrooms to describe, explain, and forge new theoretical concepts about online deliberative practices. I began with one main research question: What is the nature of deliberation on four issues-centered blogs in the high school social studies classroom? Three sub-questions helped guide my inquiry:

1. How does the cognitive or task dimension evolve online?

2. What are the social dynamics of the online group?
3. What technological aspects do participants encounter during the online activity?

Using a grounded theory approach, three key findings emerged from the data:

1. Blogging activities leaned more toward conversation and were less involved with reaching consensus.

2. Dynamic tension persisted online between authentic engagement and procedure.

3. Online deliberative activities that used Internet technologies revealed a proclivity among students to take shortcuts in reasoning.

It became clear to me early on that the blogging activities were a process and that the cognitive or task, social, and technological dimensions were interdependent. By allowing for such interconnectedness, I was able to fully describe the nature of the blogging activities, refine three themes that emerged across all the blogs, and develop a draft model of online deliberation representing these findings—all of which is discussed next.

**Discussion of the Findings**

In the previous chapter I fully described each theme and the natural tension between the teachers’ blogging goal of building practical relationships against the constraints of inviting teachable moments of conflict and controversy. I also illustrated that students often took shortcuts to reasoning during the blogging activities. The pursuant discussion of the findings is organized around the study’s sub-questions. I begin by discussing what the interviews with the participating teachers revealed. Then,
for each sub-question, I discuss what I actually observed on the blogging activities in light of relevant literature.

When I began this study I found a shared emphasis among the teachers on using the blogging activities to “authentically” involve students in “conversations” about controversial issues. Not surprisingly, the teachers shared a proclivity and openness to using new technologies in the classroom. Most noticeable across the teacher interviews were the larger roles granted to “conversation” and “authenticity.”

In previous chapters I described how Steve and Don instructed students to “enter a conversation,” as you would enter a hallway conversation and how Frank encouraged students to speak their mind. Nick and Tim provided tips on how to “keep the conversation going” in their desire to teach students workplace skills and online etiquette. Although professing a different emphasis to their assignment rationales, each teacher sought authentic student engagement in online political conversations.

In this way, these four blogging activities stand out since one recent study has shown as little as 5% of blogs being used specifically for political conversations and as much as 60% being used for personal diaries (Munson & Resnick, 2011). Munson and Resnick also found the most substantial comments came from political discussion, which was the goal of the social studies teachers in this study. It is thus important to remember these four blogging activities emerged due to their overall vigor, standing out from many dozen classroom blogging assignments I examined over the greater part of a year.
Research Sub-Question 1 Focused on the Cognitive or Task Dimension of the Blogging Activities and Revealed a Theme of Conversation Over Consensus

I first observed the marginal role of consensus and the privileged role of online conversation across the blogging activities, which aligns with Bickmore (1997) and W. C. Parker (2006). Three out of four social studies teachers in my study prioritized harmonizing group relationships over developing individual reasoning skills. The fourth teacher emphasized deliberation but eschewed the need to reach a consensus. None of the blogging activities required students to reach a group decision. Teacher instructions, interviews, and modeling led me to believe that these social studies teachers put a high priority on social harmony and rules of civility, oftentimes leaning away from the cognitive dissonance that is required in teaching controversy (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). Less emphasis was placed on instructions about individual reasoning goals (i.e., what is good evidence, how do you build a well-reasoned argument, how do you identify weaknesses in logic, etc.). Despite several stories relaying instances where conflict was a productive tool, each teacher sought above all else, a thoughtful online conversation. Common among the teachers was an aversion to false polarization or to a climate of overgeneralizations such as that they claimed is perpetuated by the news media. I considered whether, by leaving questions unresolved, the teachers were avoiding the formal decision-making process of consensus.

As I saw how these teachers led students closer to a deliberation online, I also saw their emphasis was on the social nature of an online conversation. According to what I observed online, students were only occasionally being pushed by their teachers,
or the public, to reason online. I identified this trend in how students were uncommonly civil, and rarely disagreed. I observed many students with great capacities to decipher logical fallacies; however, they often appeared reluctant to assert their objections in full view of a public audience. When a disagreement was ideological, students appeared reluctant to attack peer reasoning. On the Current Issues Blog, students naturally disagreed, but upon closer examination their differences appeared minor, particularly when fundamental value conflicts surfaced. For example, various reasons were most often used to justify a similar value where students argued about anchor babies and thought fairness should be a main concern. It was only when a humanistic perspective arose that the moral differences were fully exposed. The result was a conversation with a far different set of solutions. Overall, instances of conflict were rare across the blogs, and students throughout this study expressed many similar values online. Only occasionally were core values challenged and oftentimes by outsiders (e.g., the parent who reminded students on the American Issues Blog about the importance of learning fundamentals; adults who complained about one student’s insensitivity and ignorance of a particular disease).

Just as the practice of deliberation came into question during the teacher interviews, so too it has been the subject of intense scholarship. According to Parker, “public deliberation is the way the public creates enough common good so that people can act together to solve their problems” (1996, p. 283). For Parker a deliberation builds relationships. He promoted a democratic conversation by offering his model for one type of classroom discussion, a deliberation, that in the classroom is conversational first
and decisive as an afterthought. Despite a deliberation’s ultimate goal of decision-making, Parker prioritized the social primacy of a classroom deliberative discussion. He contended the purpose “is to nurture a culture of friendship” and as with all productive discussions, “learning is not the goal;” rather, learning is a side effect of the social interaction that leads to the deliberation’s decisive function. Parker suggested that classroom deliberations are “social occasions that provide opportunities for discussants to think, speak, listen, and learn together, with and across their differences, about a specified topic” (p. 12). Parker maintained that a consensus is difficult in classroom deliberation, as a practical matter, and recommended a written reflection paper as follow-up (2006, p. 14). Reflective writing is a commonly suggested procedure in the social studies as one form of consensus (McMurray, 2007).

On the other hand, Schudson (1997) maintained that a social conversation is an unconstrained social alternative to the more deliberative type, a democratic conversation. He argued that democracy must square the two types of talk and considered a sociable model of conversation as “non-utilitarian.” When a social conversation is the primary goal, such as we see in Parker’s classroom deliberation, it reverts to talk for talk’s sake and resembles the sociable model that “sees conversation an end-in-itself, an aesthetic pleasure” (2006, p. 299). According to Schudson (1997), the kind of “democratic talk” we see in a deliberation, “is essentially oriented to problem solving” (p. 298). Reasoning is necessary to democratic decision-making and the conversation must include an argument. Both scholars recognized the social dimension
of relationship building and the cognitive or task dimension of problem solving. They argued for balance, but in different measures.

An imbalanced approach that privileges conversation suggests a social constructivist style of deliberation. A social constructivist believes “the community is the main source of meaning for objects and events in the world” (Prawat, 1996, as cited in Doolittle and Hicks, 2003, p. 220), and undoubtedly today’s community is increasingly online. According to Parker’s definition, a classroom deliberation is a conversation with a problem-solving approach of shared understanding, and its purpose is to find justifiable solutions through the kind of talk that articulates common ends (W. C. Parker, 1996).

However, disagreement is a natural part of deliberation, so an informed social studies teacher must determine the priority. Should the deliberation privilege relationship building or cognitive and task outcomes? I saw how teachers, when blogging, leaned toward the former and away from the latter.

Research Sub-Question 2 Focused on the Social Dynamics of Blogging Activities and Showed Tension Between Authenticity and Procedure

When I observed the online activities, I regularly found a dynamic tension between procedure and authenticity, a necessity according to deliberative scholars (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). A responsibility to follow the rules and procedures could be seen in various ways. Students followed conventions of polite conversation, structured their answers to match multi-part prompts, modeled the teacher in what they said and how they said it, posted comments just before the deadline to meet participation...
requirements and in some ways appeared to be trying to please the teacher. Student blogging in varying degrees across the blogs revealed a rush to get the work done, which was most evident when comments were repetitive and brief. I often saw during the blogging activity that students conceded quickly to their teachers’ assumptions, rarely challenging the conclusions of the teachers and infrequently challenging their peers.

I also observed signs of authenticity throughout, and this juxtaposition seemed to heighten the tension. Sometimes the strain between authentic engagement and responsible compliance resulted in unintended consequences. One student on the American Issues Blog caused a public ruckus and was called an “imbecile” from an unrelated commenter upset by one of his posts. Frank shared with me how he contended with a situation where one student used the “N-word” on the Current Issues Blog. I saw that Tim censored comments that were not fit for his Class Wiki. And I observed one student picking on another student on that blog. Oftentimes, these occasions resulted in teachable moments, as I learned from talking with the teachers.

I discovered that authenticity and procedure looked different depending on the context. For instance, on some blogs formal manners appeared out of place and on others they seemed more convincing. Students on the Current Issues Blog debated passionately about a topic while many students on Nick’s Blog posted perfunctory comments or repeated thoughts of their classmates. Another difference could be seen in student-to-teacher interaction. With Steve who wanted to avoid polarizing speech, students were not seen challenging the teacher. Whereas Frank, who encouraged
students to mix it up, was frequently challenged by his students. These behaviors, doing exactly what the assignment asked or pleasing the teacher, appeared dutiful.

The classroom blogging activities that reveal students both authentically engaged and procedurally conscious reflect a divided emphasis in the literature. On one hand, Cuban (2003) argued for more structured use of technology in instruction, structure that requires teachers to advance requisite skills to guide their students in project-based learning. He found in a comprehensive observational study of several high schools that students’ in-class use of computers was primarily to complete assignments, play games, and explore CD-ROMS to find information on the Internet. “Only a tiny percentage of high school and university teachers used the new technologies to accelerate student-centered and project-based teaching practices” (p. 134). Cuban concluded that the imagined changes, “fundamental shifts in the teacher’s and students’ roles, the social organization of the classroom, and power relationships between teacher and students, simply had not happened” (p. 134) due to poor teacher training. Cuban claimed technology advocates have perennially oversold its transformational possibilities on instruction. From teacher training to student learning, structure and procedure play a role.

On the other hand, many scholars continue to tout technology’s role in authentically engaging students. Bennett (2008) said a new brand of self-motivated student requires a shift in the way educators think about instructional Internet use. He claimed a new brand of youth citizenship has emerged from the antiquated dutiful type, and it is empowerment that has caused this shift. He encouraged teachers to present
good models of self-actualization, such as online writing that might lead to real social change. Likewise, Richardson (2010) described blogging’s authentic nature as “connective writing” and promoted this new writing genre as A form that forces those who do it to read carefully and critically, that demands clarity and cogency in its construction, that is done for a wide audience, and that links to sources of the ideas expressed. In essence, we write not just to communicate but to connect with others who can potentially teach us more. (p. 28)

Blogs are a beacon for teachers, according to Richardson and others who see the new medium as an alternative route to authenticity, one that taps into the social nature of learning.

Others enter the discussion more cautiously. J. Ross (2011) broached the dialectic when she examined issues emerging from the question of how students and teachers negotiate identity and authenticity online. She argued the online venue “amplifies the destabilizing and disturbing effects of compulsory reflection,” which confounds any notion that a ‘true self’ can be revealed (p. 113). By its nature, a compulsory activity such as a class assignment is antithetical to authentic engagement and more akin to structured procedures. She contended that online instruction presents complications when authentic online reflective writing is made compulsory:

High-stakes online reflective practices constitute a demanding and invasive form of educational practice. Here the convergence of surveillance, authentication, assessment and reflection exposes students and teachers to a new intensity of
gaze and to increased demands for confession-as-performance. Rather than revealing and developing a true and unitary self, reflecting online and for assessment produces fragmented, performing, cautious, strategic selves. (p. 124)

Prescient and pertinent to this discussion, Dewey’s writings suggest he straddled authenticity and procedure. Many educators point to Dewey as a harbinger for authentic engagement, but he may be less remembered for his support of procedure. Dewey (1910) explained the need for developing reflective thinking in genuine activity, while recognizing the unique role that schools might play in building new language skills by way of established structures and procedures. In practice, authentic inquiry requires instruction that “(i) enlarges pupil’s vocabulary, (ii) renders its terms more precise and accurate, and (iii) leads to formation of habits of consecutive discourse” (p. 181). Dewey offered procedural directives to teachers that are general, situational, and flexible. For example, he suggested that high school teachers should not over-emphasize the correction of writing and mechanical errors at the costs of free expression. His emphasis on authenticity, however, did not preclude procedure. Rather, Dewey suggested teachers apply reflective balance in guiding students through habits of effective communication. As Schwab (in W. C. Parker, 2006, p. 12) wrote, “To ‘learn by doing’ was (for Dewey) neither to learn only by doing nor to learn only how to do. Doing was to go hand-in-hand with reading, reflecting, and remembering.”

I saw how blogging inspired perseverance in some students but not all. Teachers were mediating various ability and motivation levels of high school students. Not all students had the requisite writing skills or knowledge necessary to successful blogging,
so an either-or approach to deliberative blogging would not have been practical for these teachers.

Research Sub-Question 3 Focused on the Technological Aspects of Blogging Activities and Revealed a Theme of Shortcutting Reason

When I observed how the technological aspects of the online classroom influenced the blogging activity, I uncovered a tendency of student bloggers to shortcut reason, which was the third theme that emerged from the data. Again, technological influences and signs of reasoning or a lack thereof were woven throughout every aspect of this research study.

Reasoning shortcuts included showing a lack of true difference or disagreement, using logical fallacies, failing to point out logical fallacies, accepting false information uncritically, failing to provide supporting evidence, and providing hyperlinks rather than articulating arguments. The writing quality varied from blog to blog, some using texting jargon. I detected by way of student responses different levels of reading skills as well. All of this contributed to the level of reasoning observed.

Reasoning skills like other literacies are being influenced by the Internet. ICTs are changing how students learn, and educators are being called upon to connect foundational literacies with evolving new literacies (Leu et al., 2004). Leu et al. identified that “foundational literacies include skill sets such as phonemic awareness, word recognition, decoding knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, comprehension, inferential reasoning, the writing process, spelling, response to literature, and others required for the literacies of the book and other printed material” (p. 1590). New
literacies must rely on foundational literacies rather than simply replacing them. Leu et al. argued emerging literacies will make reading and writing skills even more important in an information age.

Reading, writing, and communicating are evolving as new forms of text are combined with new media resources (Leu et al., 2004). Three factors play into the evolution of technology that requires new literacy skills. First, new technologies are constantly redefining themselves, building onto a functionality that requires a base understanding of the previous innovation. Leu et al. provided the example of how word processing has evolved so that knowing a previous version is fundamental in understanding the next version’s advantages. Today a foundational knowledge of word processing skills might lead a student to explore add-on programs to Word 2010 like Zotero and Grammarly. These programs allow writers to automatically build a reference list and to learn how to self-correct their deficiencies in writing style and grammar.

Second, users themselves envision new functions beyond a technology originally designed function. Envisionment is the reasoning skill that allows individuals when encountering problems to adapt existing technology solutions toward new and creative use. Third, technology increases efficiency in information delivery that requires new literacy skills. The best example today might be how fact-checking is being done in real-time, changing how we consume media.

Thus, I witnessed on these blogs signs of such changing literacies by way of this third finding: shortcutting reasoning in online deliberative practices. Common to acquiring these literacies is the need to teach fundamental reasoning skills, which also
have a foundational structure. Applying the 21st century context has the potential of making reasoning skills more relevant to students’ lives, but more importantly, to students’ futures.

All three findings from this research study feed into the Model of Online Deliberation, which I introduced, described, and illustrated in chapter 5. This model becomes important when viewing the findings and their implications for social studies education.

**Implications for Social Studies Education**

A cut-and-dried approach to deliberation that dismisses activities too far away from the ideal may not be the right approach. The evolving nature of deliberation via the Internet demands a closer inspection of deliberative methods as they are viewed and used in the classroom. As the nature of deliberation in society changes, deliberative methods in the classroom must be adaptive.

To quickly dismiss that an online worksheet or an online bull session has no value to a student who has limited technical or social skills online seems a precipitous judgment. Likewise, I question my own predilections toward a group consensus as an ideal in terms of deliberation and recognize the value of careful consideration in and of itself.

Like other competencies, deliberative abilities are developmental. Blogging activities in a ninth grade class look very different than those of juniors or seniors. Each student, each class, and each school setting is unique and may derive benefits at various educational stages from different kinds of activities, but an either-or mindset regarding
online deliberative activities would leave many students behind. Alternatively, expecting students to participate in an online deliberation may be premature and could be more harmful than helpful. The point is not to set the bar low by making a place for, say, online bull sessions, but to help better illumine the practical challenges to a blogging activity among a group of students. Along those lines, developing a holistic model of online deliberation as put forth in chapter 5 and discussed below is intended to help identify useful sways in online blogging. The Model of Online Deliberation provides support for a developmental “and-also” approach to deliberative blogging.

**Implications of Finding 1: Conversation Over Consensus**

Finding 1, “Conversation Over Consensus,” suggests students who are not being asked to be decisive may be ill-prepared as social decision-makers. The implications of the first finding for the social studies teacher include weighing the value of social conversation in education versus the need and ability to reach consensus. Practical implications include the following methods to augment opportunities for individual cognizing particularly in terms of decision-making procedures:

1. Reflective writing, such as that done by American Issues bloggers.
2. Formal online polling
3. Reconsideration of group’s decision
4. Blogging for environmental competency as was practiced by way of individual student blogs in American Issues and in Tim’s class.

Underscoring how the cognitive and social dimensions cannot be separated in practice, W. C. Parker (2006) presented how in the college classroom avoidance of anger is for
good reason and that social conditions must be seasoned before decision making can take place.

Bickmore (1997) provided ideas about how two experienced high school teachers thrived on conflict curriculum yet in practice “mediated” its affective results within a classroom discussion. The teachers in her case study both used similar procedures to mediate conflict-driven curriculum, similar ground rules to those I found in the blogging exercises in this study. They planned for a civil discussion that included “initiating ideas and listening respectfully to others” (p. 6). Bickmore observed in her study that conflict pedagogy in the classroom engages some while silencing the more timid students. She recognized the need that social studies teachers should “address matters beyond the interpersonal realm” (p. 8). She revealed the balance teachers of conflict pedagogy must sustain to embolden the most timid students in class, while making the more vocal students sensitive to the social dynamics of group learning. She acknowledged the rules social studies teachers must maintain for affective balance, but put forth few ideas about how to instill productive cognitive conflict, in other words cognitive dissonance. Fitch and Loving (2007) maintained social adaptation will organically lead to interactions that will eventually reduce or resolve the conflict. Page (2008) offered a complementary approach, instilling the value of difference when groups make a decision. He set forth to show how diversity leads to better problem solving. A lack of diverse perspectives is one reason Dahlberg (2007) recommended reconsidering the nature and context of deliberation:
The deliberative public sphere must be rethought to account more fully for . . .
the asymmetries of power through which deliberation and consensus are
achieved, the inter-subjective basis of meaning, the centrality of respect for
difference in democracy, and the democratic role of ‘like-minded’ deliberative
groups. (p. 87)

Quite simply, without sustained disagreement a deliberation is not possible (Gutmann &
Thompson, 2004; W. C. Parker, 2006), and like mindedness has become even more
prevalent in the new online spaces.

Some of the teachers in this study attempted to stimulate different perspectives
by intentionally inviting others into the conversation. Steve and Don encouraged parents
and others to comment on the blog alongside students. Frank invited a class from a
different school to engage in the conversation about immigration. In most cases,
however, the teachers did not want to force decisions and rarely called for consensus.
Gravitating toward conversation at the expense of consensus-building work has
important implications. Avoiding altogether the need for problem solving either through
uncritical acceptance or by not calling for a group decision will lead to deterioration of
deliberation in the public sphere.

Citizens are regularly called upon to be effectual, Oliver and Shaver’s (1966)
third characteristic of a discussion. Achieving group consensus was a routine part of
loan committee meetings when I worked in banking. In order to do this, we had to work
through conflict, difference, and hierarchical power structures and it was procedure that
allowed us to do this. I’ll expand on this idea in the next section, but some of the
procedures used within the bank included formal loan committee meetings, a process for appeal, outside analysis, and two levels of authority. The meetings themselves followed Robert’s Rules of Order and other procedures set up by the bank to negotiate conflict.

This was just one example of the need, but like other advocates for an issues-centered approach to the social studies (Bickmore, 1997; Uline, Tschannen-Moran, & Perez, 2003), I believe conflict is fundamental to the curriculum, but so too is mediation by rule and experience. Further, I argue that various types of deliberative activities, including the need for procedures, become useful to the social studies teacher at different stages of the educational experience, and I expound on these ideas throughout the rest of this chapter.

**Implications of Finding 2: Dynamic Tension Between Authenticity and Procedure**

Finding 2, “Dynamic Tension Between Authenticity and Procedure,” is a necessary dialectical balance in the social learning process. This tension has been examined by the literature from many angles. “Authentic engagement” remains the focus for many as opposed to the procedural aspects such as rules, structured procedures, modeled behavior, and a focus on skills often associated with the establishment. Consequently, I have found either-or arguments to be distractions to complex development in adolescents, those students who are torn between the reality that their practical choices have real consequences to their future.

The implication is to anticipate and strategically plan for balance based upon the context within which the teacher is working. This would entail avoiding the pretense that “authentic engagement” is an easy fix and not being realistic about teacher and
student preparation time (Cuban, 2003). Authentication is a key balancing force as well. Steve and Don authenticated the American Issues blogging activities by making them as important as any other classroom activity. Other teachers also reported how the online discussions would spill back into the classroom in useful ways. The following practical implications to balance authentic engagement with necessary procedures align with Gutmann and Thompson’s (1996) approach that embraces the tension between authenticity and procedure while at the same time taking advantage of new technologies.

Balance might be achieved by integrating a user-rating system to assess reasoning and other qualities of the conversation. Comment rating systems were relatively new when I began this study. Now, user-rated systems are common, including user reviews, product endorsements, and the quality of opinions and conversations. Blogging plugins (as defined in chapter 4) that allow comment rating systems fit many purposes and are easy to add to the blog site. Intense Debate, one such web tool, allows users to rate comments on various website discussions. Students can join and rate conversations while having their own postings rated. The accumulation of points provides motivation to engage authentically in criticism and to produce thoughtful comments.

Another way to simultaneously embrace authenticity and procedure takes advantage of the fact that persuasive arguments have a structure that is more easily identifiable online. Teachers could use an online flow sheet that outlines opposing arguments. Flowing a debate is like taking a still photograph of an argument’s structure for later evaluation. When judging debates, seasoned judges must flow an argument
identifying its main rhetorical elements, and students are capable of learning the function and value of this tool. The evaluation of rhetoric seems particularly well adapted for online argumentation. Such an approach would be a foundational aspect to what I have referred to as online reasoning literacy. Just like formal debate with its rules and structure, deliberative blogging might generate even more authentic motivation with formal rules that students deem useful in practice and reflection.

Finally, that balance might be achieved if teachers create procedures for students to argue both sides of an issue. A way to make that discussion or debate stronger is arguing an alternative side and being able to consider the other side’s use of reasoning or fallacy, evidence or conjecture. Values should be able to hold up to self-scrutiny first. Ultimately, I found this practice made my high school students more appreciative of a rival’s value differences thereby instilling both tolerance and open-mindedness.

Outside of the classroom, many examples exist that further illustrate the rewards of balancing authentic engagement and routine procedures. Under the leadership of Apple Computer co-founder Steve Jobs, Pixar Animation Studios employed unique procedures to force differences of opinion, force decisions, and effectuate consensus and innovation. Formal procedures included daily meetings that promoted active criticism and a rule that required employees to add a positive comment to every critical one they made. Informal procedures developed as a result of the layout of the office building. An open space was designed to maximize interaction among all of the departments by locating in the atrium the only set of bathrooms along with all employee mailboxes. Jobs
used procedural structures to stimulate creative conflict thereby maximizing the intellectual and effectual capabilities of the group.

Above are just a few practical ideas to help balance authentic discussion with needed procedures. Teachers in this study worked toward this balance in several ways including allowing discussions to percolate and instructing students on social and communication conventions such as finding common ground and showing appreciation for others’ ideas.

**Implications of Finding 3: Shortcutting Reason**

Birds of a feather flock together. Don’t rock the boat. To get along, go along. Such idioms hint at what is a troublesome truth for citizenship educators. Oftentimes it is difficult to get diverse perspectives to join naturally into a conversation, and like mindedness is the first shortcut to reasoning. Finding 3, “Shortcutting Reason,” suggests the serious implication of citizens unable to reason and argue across differences. I observed many instances where bloggers would fall victim to the very practices they criticized such as presenting one-sided arguments thus appearing biased or sensationalizing and drawing attention to bizarre, isolated events (e.g., Rev. Jones) to publish newspapers or gain ratings. Similarly, students were instructed how to build readership. I found it interesting that all four blogging assignments included a focus on media literacy, a critical examination of news media practices.

I offer next practical implications of building in tools and procedures to facilitate reasoning literacy in light of the Internet and online platforms. Many of these suggestions overlap with the previous discussion about authenticity and procedure and
illustrate once again the inseparable nature of the cognitive or task, social, and technological dimensions of the online educational experience. What is new that could be extremely beneficial to building reasoning literacy is that online technologies are opening up unlimited resources such as the following:

1. Database and search strategies
2. Database management
3. Fact-checking
4. Facilitation of diverse perspectives
5. Online rating systems (e.g., Intense Debate)
6. Argument evaluation (e.g., flow existing online arguments such as those on the National Issues Forum or National Youth Rights Foundation)

To avoid the kind of like mindedness that short circuits reason, diverse conversations should be structured even more intentionally by the participation of parents and community members being more actively recruited to lend a voice in a matter of controversy. Some of the most authentic, deliberative moments during the blogging activities occurred when a parent, community member, or an otherwise quiet student participated, but they were rare. The “outsiders” brought into the discussions a truly different perspective. What I found interesting was that during those rare occasions that true difference entered the conversation, the conversation either ended there or veered along a new tangent rather than fully delving into the “difference.” In this way, the conversation ended when its deliberative nature heightened.

Proceduralizing difference becomes necessary. Again, a teacher might seek out and
routinize input from community members, experts, and parents to ensure difference in the conversation and thus opportunities to develop and practice reasoning. The Internet makes this doable.

New online spaces such as the four blogs in this study are generating hybrid deliberative activities, but new technologies should not overshadow foundational skills of reasoning and deliberative experiences needed by citizens in everyday situations, which Gutmann and Thompson (1996) refer to as middle democracy. They contend the “forms of deliberation in middle democracy embrace virtually any setting in which citizens come together on a regular basis to reach collective decisions about public issues” (p. 12). Blogs have become today’s middle democracy.

Although blogs were not originally designed expressly for deliberation, they have become a popular setting where citizens are interacting about key issues. This means that educators need to be part of the process of developing these tools toward more democratic aims because everyday democracy comingles “interest groups, civic associations, and schools, in which adults and children develop political understandings, sometimes arguing among themselves and listening to people with differing points of view, other times not” (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, p. 40).

Insights for practical implications may be gleaned from organizations already moving online forums toward more democratic goals. The National Issues Forum based in Dayton, Ohio, is making strides in this respect. Newspaper editors across the country also are playing a role. Although blogs were not developed for the traditional letters to the editor, publications such as the Sacramento Bee are employing a combination of
tools and screeners to explore best practices and procedures toward democratic ends. Such editors are in line with Gutmann and Thompson (1996), who contend we “must take seriously the need for moral argument within these processes and appreciate the moral potential of such deliberation (p. 40). Although the process can get messy, these editors strive to balance the need for free speech with the goal of civil dialogue.

How do social educators take part? First, they have to be in the game. Educators need to become engaged online themselves if they’re going to integrate online deliberative activities. Next, they have to learn the tools. First-hand participation in the blogosphere will provide valuable knowledge and experience about the tools and resources available to them as well as the customs and capabilities of blogging. Teachers should avail themselves of the experience and guidelines of educators who are already doing this. Informed by blogging teachers, Civil Talks (see Figure 11) provides a 12-step process to get started, moving from information literacy and technology training to learning about argumentation and practicing deliberation.

**Toward a Model of Hybrid Online Deliberative Activities**

As discussed above, I believe balance in deliberative activities is important but I contend there is value even when such hybrid online activities lean more toward one characteristic than another (i.e., conversation/consensus, authenticity/procedure). The implications of the findings and model presented in chapter 5 are significant in that bloggers could cumulatively affect a watered-down version of deliberation. I suggest that rather than an either-or proposition, online deliberation should be viewed as an evolutionary “and-also” process with each stage of the model presented in chapter 5
(i.e., online worksheet, online bull session, online seminar, online debate, and online deliberation) adding some value in the pursuit of citizenship education. By viewing online deliberation from a holistic “and-also” approach regards the dynamic between conversation and consensus and the tension between authenticity and procedure, social studies educators are better able to adapt to and harness new technologies.

The implications of this include a developmental approach to online deliberative activities and the need for a mindful assignment rationale. The Model of Online Deliberation becomes useful in doing so. A developmental approach to deliberative blogging would tie into age appropriate skills building and lay an adequate foundation of content knowledge of topics of interest to the students and community.

At one school, ninth graders might use the online bull session to learn online etiquette and to explore criteria with which to evaluate online sources. Sophomores might use the online worksheet to learn basics of argumentation and debate. Juniors might begin the year with the online seminar to thoroughly explore issues under study and by mid-year, once they have a foundation of content and communication knowledge, they might engage in online debates. Ideally, seniors would be ready for a public online deliberation of relevant issues. A different school may guide students through these stages more quickly. Figure 11 shows a 12-step process I developed for my own classroom use, and it demonstrates the developmental nature of the process of integrating online deliberative activities into the classroom.

Educators attempting to balance rational and expressive thought in the online classroom have several takeaways from this research study as were explored in this
section. Blogging both demands reasoning and presents an opportunity to hone reasoning skills, presenting a chicken-and-egg dilemma in practice. Because reading text-based argumentation allows for careful consideration unlike that in face-to-face

![Civil Talks](image)

**Figure 11.** A 12-step approach to online deliberation is on Civil Talks® website.
deliberation, those who have the tools of argumentation are better prepared. However, I have found the online forum does not automatically translate into such careful reading or critical thinking as some would have us believe. As students learn to both craft arguments, and evaluate the reasoning of others, this will likely lead to more effective deliberative outcomes across platforms.

In short, skills and rules still matter but they may look different online. This was underscored by one student’s father, who participated on the American Issues Blog and subtly reminded students and teachers that learning the fundamentals of math, science, and English should not be overshadowed by creative expression. Likewise, learning and practicing the fundamentals of reasoning ought not be overshadowed by a blogging paradigm focused on expressive conversation. All one need do to be convinced is reflect on notable Twitter or YouTube movements over the last few years and consider the socio-political ramifications and current phenomena that have the power to precipitate conflict or prevent the resolution of conflict. This and more would make worthwhile future research, which I’ll address at chapter’s end after discussing limitations and trustworthiness.

Limitations of the Study

The research process involves the act of scrutiny that identifies the limitations of theoretical conclusions as they are discovered, so I have delineated limitations of this research study below. Limitations are not considered a weakness in qualitative research; rather, they become the basis for more research and further inquiry into a problem.
The first limitation is that this research is speculative and based on a small number of classroom blogs even though those four blogs surfaced from an intensive process of informally analyzing dozens of such blogs previously. Those who read this dissertation should not assume the resultant models will fit the particular context of their learning environment. For instance, two of the schools under study were resource rich and high achieving, an additional limitation in and of itself. Using the thick description provided in this study, readers should be able to ascertain whether using these data would be appropriate given their individual situations.

A second limitation is that virtual observation is necessarily partial (Hine, 2000). The accounts developed within this dissertation are based on strategic relevance to my particular research questions, and my “observation” is limited to the discussions as they were presented online and supplemented by teacher interviews. Online relationships supplement face-to-face communication (Hayden & Ball-Rokeach, 2007), so I was able to observe just a portion of each class, the time spent communicating online. Extending the observation into the classroom would provide even fuller insights. At several points on Tim’s Class Wiki I sensed affective behaviors may be influencing the pointed back-and-forth conversation between a girl and a boy, but without more cues I ended up relying on the teacher’s account of the class climate. An assertive debating style among a handful of students on the Current Issues Blog suggested friendly competition, which I was able to validate during the teacher interview, but ethnographic research that includes the actual classroom would add rich first-person insight and an even fuller picture of the deliberative activities especially when it comes to social presence.
The third limitation is that communication platforms are ever changing. In the
time this research study was underway, new technologies have been developed and
blogging continues to evolve. Because of these rapid changes, researchers who study
instructional technologies can never fully anticipate the degree to which their findings
will be useful to a future situation.

**Trustworthiness**

In light of the tenets of social constructivism, the goal of this study was not to
find generalizable knowledge or to seek some *a priori* objective truth, but rather to add
rich insight to an ongoing conversation since all knowledge is socially situated and
contextual. Humans perceive reality in many different ways based on complex and
variable culture and historical understandings that shape each individual’s unique life
experience (Vygotsky, 1978). Correspondingly, human knowledge both reflects and is
adapted from the associative experiences, education, and culture between individuals
and society (Dewey, 1916). Influenced by Dewey’s epistemological stance that also
parallels Vygotsky’s ideas about cultural transmission, this study seeks understanding of
the variation and richness of human experience, such as the increasing online school
environments that are conducive to a student’s learning. Gaining such insights through a
study such as this provides a stance that is nuanced, conceptual, and often defies
quantifiable explanation. The trustworthiness of this study was strengthened by
providing contextual richness, using multiple methods, co-constructing meaning, and
using peer debriefers—all of which adds to the transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 2005)
of this data.
First, a painstaking description of the context of this research study was provided in chapter 4. The reason I explain each learning environment in detail is because such elaboration provides contextual richness that allows readers to make their own assumptions (Charmaz, 2006).

Second, rather than relying solely on my observations of the online discourse, I chose to incorporate multiple methods and data sources so that in combination they might present a fuller picture of the process under study. In keeping with the qualitative approach, this study drew upon interviews, observation, and archival data that have been flexibly applied to derive meaning from a situation through interpretation and analysis.

Third, since credibility is built when the researcher keeps the participant’s voice and meaning present in theory building (Charmaz, 2006), I drew on the teachers’ perspectives during theoretical memo writing and model development. Qualitative educational research holds the possibility for a more civil discourse that begins with practical models teachers and researchers co-construct for effective instruction. This stems from the far-reaching conception, idealized for social theories in general, that exceptional models can become self-fulfilling prophesies. In other words, speculative theory has the potential to “affect expectations that alter the outcome of a situation (Merton, 1979, p. xxii). Therefore, with the hope of building such a model, this study was guided by the inductive procedures of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and relied upon co-construction.

Finally, I used several peer debriefers to add to the trustworthiness of this study. The role of a peer debriefer is to question and provide feedback “so the account will
resonate with people other than the researcher” (Creswell, 2007, p. 196). I utilized this process frequently during the data coding, data analysis, category building, and theme development stages of my research. In addition to meeting with my adviser biweekly and relying on her as a primary peer debriefer, I was able to seek peer debriefing from two outside scholars who are not involved with the study but who are experienced in grounded theory methods.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Reflecting on the limitations and trustworthiness of this study precipitated ideas about how to build on the research. Since the teachers’ intentions greatly impacted the deliberative blogging activities, it would be useful to hone in on this particular aspect. Within vastly different contexts, I observed this innovative teaching method put to various uses and with varying results. Institutional resources and support, student ability and motivation level, teacher bias—all of these shaped the online deliberation process.

The growing body of knowledge on digital deliberation appears split along quantitative and qualitative paths; however, a pluralistic lens may be more useful when considering the roles played by decision-making, cognitive reasoning, and formal argumentation within citizenship education. What would a longitudinal study of students’ reasoning literacy reveal? How does reasoning change when deliberative activities move online? What are age appropriate learning objectives when it comes to deliberative blogging? Future exploration would benefit from ethnographic study inside the classroom as well as a quantitative examination of students’ reasoning skills over time. Action research could prove useful in terms of social studies methods. For
example, a pragmatic perspective would not shy away from prescribed procedures for deliberative activities and for facilitation that might help the teacher enhance students’ ability to reason.

Although the intent of this research study was not to delve into theories of cognitive and moral development, I observed differences in the blogging activities between grade levels. In fact, when observing seniors deliberate on the Current Issues Blog, I began coding for differences between the caring and justice perspective (as seen through the lens of Gilligan) and then withdrew from that path for lack of sufficient theoretical grounding. A focus on developmental online deliberation would prove invaluable to future studies. Recognizing the work of Piaget (1967) is foundational to understanding cognitive and moral development, his would be an important lens with which to examine how cognitive growth might be a factor in deliberative activities and how age-appropriate deliberative activities might be structured online.

A social awareness emerges as a result of a child’s cognitive growth, typically beginning in early adolescence (Piaget, 1967). In terms of cognitive and moral development, the junior high and high school years are transitional. During these years moral-decision making typically moves beyond dutiful compliance to broader and more abstract social choices. Cognitive development occurs by way of learning how to resolve increasingly complex social problems, making controversy and deliberation essential elements in a social education. Previous studies (Hahn & Tocci, 1990) demonstrated such growth and underscore the significant role conflict can play in the classroom.
In this research study I did not intend to examine how gender, age, and ethnic difference played out in online deliberation, but this is a crucial consideration for future research. Also, it is important to consider the learners in terms of the role online discussions have on their motivation and on their actual learning. Equally important is a deeper look at teacher presence as it influences the online deliberative activities and institutional support as it affects what the teachers do and do not do in the online classroom.

Finally, after surfacing during this research study the question, “What is deliberation?” seems to beg for further exploration in this changed media landscape. Are new literacies (e.g., using multimedia) being developed at the expense of traditional literacies such as reasoning? I observed an emphasis on the social activity of conversation over the cognitive or task dimension of reaching consensus. The implications are many for a citizenry educated in a realm that privileges conversation over consensus, and yet balance may be the antidote to such a false dialectic. The online classroom comprises overlapping social and cognitive dimensions (Garrison et al., 1999). As such, the Model of Online Deliberation (see Figure 10) may be useful to social studies teachers in that it provides various types to fit different needs and contexts—from low to high decision-making and from low to high authenticity. Viewing both dimensions candidly might allow more nuanced intentionality in developing the curriculum and also in tailoring blogging activities to a particular class or situation.
In observing a lack of reasoning in this initial study, I see a need to delve more deeply in this area. As I mentioned above, gauging reasoning literacy at the high school level over time would be useful. Now that the nature of online deliberation has been explored, future work could more broadly analyze the quantity and quality of online deliberation. To conclude this section, I recommend seven research questions that will provide insights into these areas.

1. What is the teaching rationale for integrating online deliberative blogging activities in the classroom?
2. How is that rationale supported or not supported by the institution? The community?
3. How do online deliberative blogging activities enhance students’ reasoning abilities?
4. How do social studies teachers facilitate online deliberative activities to better develop reasoning skills among students?
5. How do students participating in an online deliberation perceive the design of the learning activity in regards to their motivation and their learning?
6. What influence do age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic factors have on an online deliberation in the social studies classroom?
7. What is the current-day practical definition of deliberation?

**Conclusion**

I was humbled and honored to work with the social studies teachers in this study. I expected to find plenty of deliberative blogging and I did, but I was surprised at how
difficult it was to find exemplars in the high school social studies classroom. I appreciated that much more finding these robust blogs and was amazed at the work being done by these four educators.

Deliberative communication entails rational-critical argument, public issue focus, equality, discussion topic focus, inter-ideological questioning, and inter-ideological reciprocity (Freelon, 2010). “A relatively high quantity of cross-cutting discussion is usually also considered an essential element” (p. 1181). The online activities analyzed in this study demonstrated a hybrid approach with less formality, and I observed deliberative characteristics in varying degrees. My findings suggest conversation has become privileged over traditional deliberative activities and conversation, according to some, is a skill more important today than ever before. Webber (1993) described conversation as the means by which people share and often develop what they know. He discussed the revolution in information and communications technologies that makes knowledge the most competitive resource and creating conversations the most important work.

This study supports previous research that has found deliberations less structured and sometimes more expressive as opposed to rational. Some contend less formality does not make deliberation less relevant. I agree and argue since informal online deliberations are more integrated into our day-to-day lives, they are perhaps even more relevant and our efforts should focus on enriching deliberation in these spaces. At the same time it is important to acknowledge that deliberations become less meaningful when rational thinking is discarded altogether as highlighted by Randall (2011), “What
we are seeing . . . is . . . a fundamental disregard for rational and scientific thinking” (p. 20). Concern over the state of deliberation is not relegated to the academy. The topic surfaced recently in an interview with popular rock star Sting, who said:

I don’t think there is any political discourse in this country. People tend to speak in sound bites, which have nothing to do with any kind of information that’s useful. I miss genuine debate . . . But the system doesn’t seem to support that level of discourse even in, you know, the greatest democracy on the planet. (Luscombe, 2011, n.p.)

The need for a higher quality of discourse is not new. Oliver and Shaver (1966) made this argument a half century ago in calling for more research to develop sophisticated dialogues and in calling for teachers to develop their communication skills through experience and a defined structure. Similarly, I argue for more research to develop sophisticated online deliberative practices.

Many scholars point to the Internet as providing public spaces in which people can become more engaged citizens by way of informal deliberation in their day-to-day lives (Coleman & Gotze, 2001; Dahlberg, 2007; Dahlgren, 2005). Ultimately, online deliberation requires a full arsenal of reasoning literacy—inductive thinking and also deductive thinking along with all of the tools of argumentation and debate. It requires an equilibrium that values procedure as well as authenticity, consensus and also conversation. I argue that when these characteristics are balanced, the online activity most resembles deliberation and, theoretically, the students are in the Zone of Optimal
Reasoning, which I also introduced in chapter 5. When the characteristics are not balanced, deliberation suffers.

Citizens around the world increasingly rely on digital technology 24/7 for a variety of reasons, some eager for increased democracy, others for activities that serve merely to dilute deliberation. Since the majority of conversations are taking place online and via mobile communications, developing best practices in mediated deliberation should be of paramount concern to social educators.
APPENDICES
Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Q: What is the nature of deliberation generated on 4 issues-centered blogs in the social studies classroom?
   a) What are the social dynamics of the online group?
   b) How does the cognitive or task dimension evolve online?
   c) What technological aspects do participants encounter during the online activity?

Part I. Background
   1. Tell me about yourself and your involvement in community, political and social issues.
   2. Tell me about your technological skills and experiences.

Part II. The Deliberative Blogging Experience
Now, I would like to hear about your blogging experience in this class.
   3. What was helpful to you regarding technology?
   4. What else might be helpful regarding technology?
   5. I’d like you to describe in depth the online deliberation that took place during this project.
   6. Expand on what worked, in your opinion, regarding the deliberative process.
   7. What didn’t work about the deliberative process itself.
   8. Now I’d like to hear about the social dynamics you encountered.

Part III. Conclusion
   9. During the deliberation, do you think your students made sound decisions? Explain.
   10. What, if anything, did they gain from deliberative blogging?
   11. Discuss the online deliberation as compared with the classroom debate.
   12. Did students experience any unintended consequences online? Explain.
   13. What else would you like to say about deliberative blogging?
   14. Are blogs or online forums something you would assign again? Why or why not?
APPENDIX B

TEACHER CONSENT FORM
Appendix B

Teacher Consent Form

Confidential Records
Your name will not be linked to your participation in the study report in any way. Any identifying information will be kept in a secure location and only I will have access to the data. Your signed consent form will be kept separate from your study data, and responses will not be linked to you. Study-related information will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. You and your students will not be identified in any publication or presentation of research results, only aggregate data will be used.

Your research information may, in certain circumstances, be disclosed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which oversees research at Kent State University, or to certain federal agencies.

Contact Information
If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Jeffrey Drake, researcher at 330-941-6779 or Todd Hawley, research advisor at 330-672-2380. This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at 330.672.2704.

Consent Statement and Signature
I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

Signature ____________________________ Date ________________

Division of Research and Sponsored Programs
117 Cartwright Hall • P.O. Box 5390 • Kent, Ohio 44242-0390
330-672-2381 • Fax: 330-672-2383 • http://www.kent.edu
Confidential Records
Your name will not be linked to your participation in the study report in any way. Any identifying information will be kept in a secure location and only I will have access to the data. Your signed consent form will be kept separate from your study data, and responses will not be linked to you. Study related information will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. You and your students will not be identified in any publication or presentation of research results; only aggregate data will be used.

Your research information may, in certain circumstances, be disclosed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which oversees research at Kent State University, or to certain federal agencies.

Contact Information
If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Jeffrey Drake, researcher at 330-963-5779 or Todd Hawley, research advisor at 330-672-2580. This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at 330.672.2704.

Consent Statement and Signature
I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

_________________________  _______________________
Signature               Date

Division of Research and Sponsored Programs
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330.672.2851 • Fax: 330.672.2628 • http://www.kent.edu
APPENDIX C

AUDIO TAPEING CONSENT FORM
Appendix C

Audio Taping Consent Form

APPENDIX C: AUDIO TAPING CONSENT FORM

AUDIO TAPING CONSENT FORM

Civil Talks: Understanding classroom blogging in the social studies classroom.

I agree to audio taping our interviews for the purposes of accuracy and record keeping. These conversations will take place during our formal and informal discussions whether they be online, on the phone, or in person; however, you will be notified prior to any conversation when you are being recorded and may request that any conversation not be taped. The purpose of our conversations surrounds the general research questions:

What is the nature of discourse generated on an issue-centered blogs used in the high school social studies classroom?

________________________________________ Date

Signature

I have been told that I have the right to hear the audio tapes before they are used. I have decided that I:

____ want to hear the tapes ______ do not want to hear the tape.

Sign now below if you do not want to hear the tapes. If you want to hear the tapes, you will be asked to sign after hearing them.

Jeffrey Drake and other researchers approved by Kent State University may / may not use the tapes made of me. The original tapes or copies may be used for:

____ this research project ______ teacher education ______ presentation at professional meetings

________________________________________ Date

Signature

Address:

Division of Research and Sponsored Programs
117 Cartwright Hall • P.O. Box 5190 • Kent, Ohio 44242-0519
330-672-2351 • Fax: 330-672-2608 • http://www.kent.edu

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APPENDIX D
IRB APPROVAL LETTER
Appendix D

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

July 14, 2010

Jeffrey Drake
Curriculum Leadership

Re: # 10-231: "Civil Talks: Understanding Classroom Blogging in the Social Studies Classroom"

I am pleased to inform you that the Kent State University Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved your protocol through the expedited (Level II) review process. Approval is effective for a twelve-month period:

July 14, 2010 through July 13, 2011.

Federal regulations and Kent State University IRB policy require that research be reviewed at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk, but not less than once per year. The IRB has determined that this protocol requires an annual review and progress report. The IRB will forward an annual review reminder notice to you by email as a courtesy. Please note that it is the responsibility of the principal investigator to be aware of the study expiration date and submit the required materials. Please submit review materials (annual review form and copy of current consent form) one month prior to the expiration date.

HHS regulations and Kent State University Institutional Review Board guidelines require that any changes in research methodology, protocol design, or principal investigator have the prior approval of the IRB before implementation and continuation of the protocol. The IRB must also be informed of any adverse events associated with the study. The IRB further requests a final report at the conclusion of the study.

Kent State University has a Federal wide Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP); FWA Number 00001853.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 330-672-2704 or Pweshko@kent.edu.

Sincerely,

Paulette Washko
Manager, Research Compliance, Communications and Initiatives

Division of Research and Sponsored Programs
Office of Research Safety and Compliance
(330) 672-2704 Fax: (330) 672-2954
P.O. Box 5180, Kent, Ohio 44242-0001
RE: IRB #10-231 entitled "CIVIL TALKS: An Analysis of Online Discussions in the Social Studies Classroom"

Hello,

The Kent State University Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved your Annual Review and Progress Report for protocol #10-231. It is understood that the research is continuing without changes. Protocol approval has been extended and is effective:

July 14, 2011 through July 13, 2012

A copy of the IRB approved consent form is attached to this email. This "stamped" copy is the consent form that you must use for your research participants. It is important for you to also keep a text copy (i.e., Microsoft Word version) of your consent form for subsequent submissions.

Federal regulations and Kent State University IRB policy requires that research be reviewed at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk, but not less than once per year. The IRB has determined that this protocol requires an annual review and progress report. The IRB will try to send you an annual review reminder notice by email as a courtesy. However, please note that it is the responsibility of the principal investigator to be aware of the study expiration date and submit the required materials. Please submit review materials (annual review form and copy of current consent form) one month prior to the expiration date.

HHS regulations and Kent State University Institutional Review Board guidelines require that any changes in research methodology, protocol design, or principal investigator have the prior approval of the IRB before implementation and continuation of the protocol. The IRB must also be informed of any adverse events associated with the study. The IRB further requests a final report at the conclusion of the study.

Kent State University has a Federal Wide Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP); EWA Number 00001852.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 330-672-2704 or pwashko@kent.edu

Respectfully,
Kent State University Office of Research Compliance
137 Cartwright Hall | fax 330.672.2658

Kevin McCready | Research Compliance Coordinator | 330.672.8058 | kmccread4@kent.edu
Laurie Kiehl | Research Compliance Assistant | 330.672.0837 | lkiehl@kent.edu
Pamela Washko | Manager, Research Compliance | 330.672.2704 | pwashko@kent.edu

For links to obtain general information, access forms, and complete required training, visit our website at www.kent.edu/research.
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