A Jigsaw Strategy: Teaching Opposing Viewpoints on the Ratification of the United States Constitution

The jigsaw strategy can be utilized in teaching higher level thinking skills such as recognizing different points of view on historical issues.

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Social studies educators generally agree that two major goals of the twenty-first century should be the development of critical thinking and cooperative learning skills (1). These objectives do not have to be separate endeavors. There is an opportunity to use critical thinking skills while engaged in cooperative learning (2). Indeed, cooperative learning research has indicated that the attainment of higher-level thinking skills is a concomitant development of student team learning (3). In social studies research there is evidence that cooperative learning procedures increase students’ thinking skills (4).

A cooperative learning strategy that offers promise for the development of thinking skills is the jigsaw technique introduced by Aronson and his colleagues (5). This strategy employs a high degree of task specialization in which students become proficient on selected topics and then share with others in the group. As specialists, students have the opportunity to delve deeply into the topic and enhance their thinking skills.

According to critical thinking advocates, a skill that is essential for cognitive development is that of recognizing opposing viewpoints (6). This skill identifies an author’s beliefs on issues and recognizes the stated and unstated assumptions that support these perspectives. John Stuart Mill offered the following persuasive case for learning this skill:

The only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this (7).

Recognizing point of view is a skill that is readily adaptable to the jigsaw strategy. Each part of an issue can be investigated separately. Since each point of view can stand independent of the others, the material can easily be divided into alternate positions. Each jigsaw group could represent a different point of view. All points of view are needed to be known to fully understand the issue.

For many teachers, the task of finding appropriate narrative materials which also can be separated into parts and still maintain some unity of structure is very difficult (8). However, there are materials that lend themselves naturally to the jigsaw technique which have not been duly recognized in the cooperative learning research. Known generally as opposing viewpoints literature, these materials express multiple points of view on historical and current issues (9).
The following example illustrates how a jigsaw technique can be utilized to teach a lesson that presents opposing views on an historical issue.

The following is a step-by-step procedure for using a jigsaw strategy to teach opposing viewpoints on the ratification of the United States Constitution.

**Step 1**
Divide class into four jigsaw groups. Distribute four different position papers (found on pages 10 and 11) to various students in the group. The position papers will be labeled Delegates A, B, C, and D. Each student will receive a position paper expressing a different view regarding the ratification of the United States Constitution. For different reasons, delegates A and C challenge the ratification of the Constitution whereas delegates B and D favor the ratification of the Constitution. Students will read their position papers silently.

**Step 2**
When students have finished reading their position papers, they will move into four expert groups. These groups consist of other class members who represent the same delegate position. While in the expert groups, the students consult with one another to make sure that they understand the important points of their position papers.

**Step 3**
Instruct students to return to their original jigsaw groups to discuss the different arguments pertaining to the ratification of the Constitution. Encourage each group to answer the discussion questions at the bottom of each position paper. Provide copies of the Constitution as a reference to answer questions.

**Step 4**
Assign an essay requiring the whole class to explain the views of each of the delegate positions.

As a follow-up to the jigsaw strategy, the students can be guided to prepare for an informed debate. They could use the knowledge that they acquired from the position papers as a springboard for further inquiry through library research assignments. A mock constitutional convention could also be set up in which students role-play as delegates.

Most jigsaw strategies in the literature have emphasized the acquisition of factual knowledge (10). This has been too limited a goal. The above strategy indicates that the jigsaw strategy can be utilized in teaching higher level thinking skills such as recognizing different points of view on historical issues.

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**Endnotes**

Position Papers

DELEGATE A

"The Confederation, this same despised government, merits, in my opinion, the highest encomium. It carried us through a long and dangerous war, it rendered us victorious in that bloody conflict with a powerful nation; it has secured us a territory greater than any European monarch possesses and shall a government which has been thus strong and vigorous, be accused of imbecility and want of energy? Consider what You are about to do before you part with the government . . . .

This constitution is said to have beautiful features, but when I come to examine these features, sir, they appear to be horribly frightful: among other deformities, it has an awful squinting; it squints toward monarchy. Your president may easily become king: your senate is so imperfectly constructed that your dearest rights may be sacrificed by what may be a small minority. . . .

If your American chief be a man of ambition and abilities, how easy it is for him to render himself absolute.

Away with your president, we shall have a king: the army will salute him monarch: your militia will leave you and assist in making him king, and fight against you . . . ."

Questions
1. Is Delegate A in favor or against the Constitution?
2. Why does he feel this way?
3. Specifically, of what parts of the Constitution is Delegate A in favor or against? Refer to appropriate article and sections of the Constitution.

DELEGATE B

"If any dangerous and unnecessary powers be given to the general legislature, let them be plainly demonstrated.

Sir, by this government, powers are not given to any particular set of men, they are in the hands of the people; delegated to their representatives chosen for short terms; to representatives responsible to the people, and whose situations are perfectly similar to their own: as long as this is the case we have no danger to apprehend. . . .

(Those) who wish to become federal representatives, must depend on . . . that class of men who will be the most popular in their counties, who generally represent the people in the state governments . . . It is almost certain, therefore, that the deliberations of the members of the federal house of representatives will be directed to the interests of the people of America. As to the other branch, the senators will be appointed by the legislatures, and though elected for six years, I do not conceive (think) they will so soon forget the source from whence they derive their political existence . . . .

(Direct) taxation is . . . generally objected to (but it) can be of little advantage to those in power, to raise money in a manner oppressive to the people . . . ."

Questions
1. Is Delegate B in favor or against the new Constitution?
2. Why does he feel this way?
3. Specifically, of what parts of the Constitution is Delegate B in favor or against? Refer to appropriate article and section of the Constitution.
DELEGATE C

"Sir, the question is, whether congress shall have power... This (section) "provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare:" I look upon... (as) big with mischiefs. Congress will have power to keep standing armies. The great Mr. Pitt says, standing armies are dangerous—keep your militia in order... We are able to stand our own ground against a foreign power—they cannot starve us out, they cannot bring their ships on the land; we are a nation of healthy and strong men—our land is fertile, and we are increasing in members... Let us amend the old confederation. Why not give congress power only to regulate trade; some say that those we owe will fall upon us; but... the balance of power in the old countries will not permit it—the other nations will protect us... (Where) is the bill of rights which shall check the power of this congress, which shall say, thus far shall ye come, and no farther. The safety of the people depends on a bill of rights... There are some parts of this constitution which I cannot digest; and, sir, shall we swallow a large bone for the sake of little meat? Some say swallow the whole now, and pick out the bone afterwards. But I say, let us pick off the meat, and throw the bone away."

Questions
1. Is Delegate C in favor or against the Constitution?
2. Why does he feel this way?
3. Specifically, of what parts of the Constitution is he in favor or against? Refer to appropriate article and section of the Constitution.

DELEGATE D

"I am a plain man and get my living by the plough. I am not used to speaking in public, but I get your leave to say a few words to my brother plough-joggers in this house...

We are by this Constitution allowed to send ten men to Congress. Have we not more than that number fit to go? I dare say, if we pick out ten, we shall have another ten left, and I hope ten times ten—and will not these be a check upon those that go? Will they go to Congress and abuse their power, and do mischief, when they know that they must return and look the other ten in the face, and be called to account for their conduct: Some gentlemen think that our liberty and property are not safe in the hands of moneyed men, and men of learning. I am not of that mind.

Brother farmers, let us suppose a case now: Suppose you have a farm of fifty acres, and your title was disputed and there was a farm of five thousand acres joined to you, that belonged to a man of learning, and his title was involved in the same difficulty; would not you be glad to have him for your friend rather than to stand alone in the dispute? Well, the case is the same; these lawyers, these moneyed men, these men of learning are all embarked in the same cause with us and we must all swim or sink together; and shall we throw the Constitution overboard because it does not please us alike?

Some gentlemen say—don't be in a hurry, take time to consider, and don't take a leap in the dark. I say—take things in time, gather fruit when it is ripe. There is a time to sow, and a time to reap. We sowed our seed when we sent men to the Federal Convention; now is the harvest, now is the time to reap the fruit of our labor and if we don't do it now, I am afraid we never shall have another opportunity."

Questions
1. Is Delegate D in favor or against the new Constitution?
2. Why does he feel this way?
3. Specifically, of what parts of the Constitution is he in favor or against? Refer to appropriate article and section of the Constitution.