

Fostering an Interactive Social Studies Classroom Instruction During a Pandemic: Experience, Practice, and Advice

Razak Kwame Dwomoh
Purdue University

Abstract:

This essay expounds on the merits and demerits of two social studies instructional strategies (cooperative learning and discussions) through virtual means in the current Covid-19 global pandemic, and offers eight helpful guidelines in addressing the strategies for social studies instructors. The merits of virtual cooperative learning and discussions include distance learning, elicitation and extraction, introduction to new virtual technological tools, appreciation of diversity and diverse opinions, and sharing of external resources. The demerits include the fear of large class sizes, the disconnect in classroom interactions, cultural and socio-cultural differentiations, non-constructive discourses, “the preferential syndrome,” classroom discussion tardiness, and verbose posts. Eight recommendations for instructors include the use of Voice Threads for audio and video discussions, a synchronous class introduction, responding to peers with minimal or no responses to their posts, assigning chapters of reading for students to present, balancing complimentary remarks with analytical critiques to posts, instructors working with students to plan alternatives during technological challenges, and a formative and summative assessment of students’ engagement, discussion, and learning experiences.

Key words: virtual learning, social studies instructional strategies, peer discussion, cooperative learning.

Introduction

This essay is a narrative account of the experiences, practice, and recommendations of a social studies student-instructor that reflects varied perspectives and effective ways of teaching social studies during the Covid-19 global pandemic. The narration addresses the merits and demerits of two main virtual modes of social studies instructional strategies, cooperative learning

Corresponding author: rdwomoh@purdue.edu

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(Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993; Larson, & Keiper, 2011; Sharan & Shachar, 1988; Slavin, 1980, 1983, 1995) and discussions (Larson, & Keiper, 2011), and provides resources to foster and mitigate the two strategies for college-level instructors. The focus is on how college instructors can effectively teach social studies courses remotely using synchronous and asynchronous ways to engage students, encourage peer discussions, and assess students' virtual learning experiences. This study will create the awareness and the consciousness of the experiences of students and instructors in a typical virtual classroom. The suggestions are intended to help instructors plan and choose from the multiple choices for ensuring effective and interactive social studies virtual instruction during a pandemic.

Virtual Learning

According to Howell (2003), there are few learning environments that effectively create and provide the platform and resources to students so that they can actively engage in questioning and answering. There are several studies that expound on classroom environments and universities incorporating virtual learning where experiences can be shared and practice documented (Armitage, Browne, & Jenkins, 2001; Browne & Jenkins, 2003; Moron-Garcia, 2004; Weller, 2007). The conversational framework propounded by Laurillard (1993, 2001) indicates that the use of technology should help enhance classroom discourses between students and teachers and among students in knowledge construction. The study by Jyothi, McAvinia, and Keating (2012) posits that computer-mediated communication "systems allow learners to interact with one another over time and promote collaborative learning" (p. 32).

Merits

Distance learning. The recent outbreak of the novel coronavirus poses a great challenge to instructors, students, and educators. Since the pandemic is a public health concern, its "social" impact places a great demand on social studies instructors and educators globally to employ effective and appropriate pedagogical tools in delivering instruction virtually, in the planning, allocation of resources, instruction, and assessment phases of a lesson, so as to help mitigate the proliferation of the spread of the virus in social studies classrooms. As a social studies student-instructor, in my opinion, this shift to online instruction and remote learning serves the continued purposes of academic work, educational goals, and a community of social interactors for collaborative learning and research.

Elicitation and extraction. The virtual mode of social studies instruction allows social studies instructors to create a student-centered learning environment (Moate, & Cox, 2015;

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Schweisfurth, 2014; Weimer, 2002) where students can cognitively engage synchronously with their peers through discussions and presentations. I have observed from class this summer that a post from one student can elicit several responses from the other students that can bolster knowledge in a particular field of inquiry.

Introduction to new and different technological tools for learning. Many social studies instructors and students from Sub-Saharan African countries, like in some other disciplines, have limited internet access (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2007) and hence, may lack the requisite skills in using new technological tools. Gakio, (2006) rightly puts it that internet connection in Africa is "too little, too expensive and poorly managed" (p. iii). This shift will allow them and other students with minimal skills to explore and use technology tools to learn and build their technological skills. Instructors will also learn new ways of delivering an effective virtual instruction. Also, it is an effective teaching tool during a global pandemic. In this global pandemic, in-person instruction is becoming less prioritized, so it is expedient that social studies teachers resort to, learn, and effectively use virtual means of instruction.

Demerits

Threat of large class sizes. A large and asynchronous class size can pose the threat of voices not being recognized in a pool of discussion threads. I have observed with time that at the beginning of every course, the students who do not engage in class introduction by introducing themselves in the introductory thread become overwhelmed with the subsequent discussions and assignments for the rest of the semester, and postpone their introduction to a later time, especially if the course is offered in the summer, as a result of the limited instructional and learning hours (approximately 2-4 weeks) for summer courses. Failure to self-introduce in the initial stages of the class gives the other students little or no clue of their peer in class. When this happens, it leaves a vast relational gap among several students throughout the course of the class. This gap benefits no one in the class and hinders collaborative and peer learning.

Pictorial representations. In virtual classrooms, students do not have a face-to-face interaction with their peers and it creates a disconnect among the students (Stodel, Thompson & MacDonald, 2006). This creates an "abstract" classroom environment in social studies classrooms where each student might not know the next colleague in the class when all the learning and discussions are done asynchronously. Also, when all the readings, learning, and discussions are done through text, they have the tendency to make the class "boring" and lose touch with real-world analogies.

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Cultural, religious, social, and learning differentiation. Diverse students engage in virtual class instructions (Bonk, & Zhang, 2006). Each student, too, comes to a virtual class with some background cultural, religious, and social perspectives on the present global crisis and public health concerns, as well as different ways of learning and, to some, “mystical” beliefs about the do’s and don’ts in using technology to learn and spending time on the internet. Some, too, prefer reading handwritten and typed notes to e-reading. When all these factors are not considered when creating social studies course content for a virtual class, the instructor might lose students’ intellectual and affective inputs in the entire learning process. Their virtual presence may be there, but the whole faculty of reasoning, comprehension, historical thinking, historical argumentation, and learning may be entirely lost. In addition, some students might choose not to respond to or actively engage in a discussion that they feel contradicts their ideological, health, religious, social, or political standpoints.

Virtual Discussions

Virtual discussions where students can critique peer-written texts and documents and corroborate resources via e-learning can be very instrumental to the teaching of social studies. The challenge is that some researchers have raised concerns and questions about the role of participation in online discussions in fostering learning (Goodfellow & Hewling, 2005). Therefore, students’ participation and mutual involvement in online class discussions need careful consideration. A large class size where there is daily class activity can pose a major challenge to the instructor in allocating time to review all discussion threads and give remarks (Fitzgibbon & Jones, 2004; Hamuy & Galaz, 2010; Karasavvidis, 2009). In addition, some learning prompts in social studies do not encourage students to engage in critical critiques of a peer writing, but merely a passing commentary of what is observed in the writing (Bickford, Bickford, & Dwomoh, 2020). According to Bickford et al., (2020), such students who do “not ask too many questions” in a writing prompt ends up presenting “shallow work” to the teacher (p.15).

Merits

Social studies students learn from each other’s lived, academic, and social experiences that inform their sense of societal differences, problems, and the possible solutions to redress and mitigate such societal problems and differences. Since students come from diverse cultural and socio-cultural backgrounds, the virtual discussions provide room to openly express one’s opinion without being reticent about feelings or fear of prejudice, which students might have experienced in an in-person classroom. This “openness” can help them appreciate others and

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broaden their social construct of the world around them. It serves as a platform to share opinionated views.

Sharing of external resources and materials. Discussion threads that create room for students to share other resources and materials with peers is seen to empower peer discussions. In one of my classes, the instructor created a slot on the discussion thread, and the resources the students shared among themselves started a new conversation different from the discussion questions we were asked to respond to. I realized that when students facilitate their own learning, there is maximum interest in what they want to read, explore, find, analyze, share, and discuss. Several of the students explored the links to the resources shared by their peers, and they responded to how the resources were beneficial to their study.

Demerits

Unequal engagement in constructive classroom discourse. Some students may hide behind a large class size to disregard posts from other peers. This could be a total neglect or a demonstration of non-interest in other students' contribution to a discussion. Some students might never read posts from their peers on their discussion board platform throughout the duration of the course, especially when they are given a minimum number to respond to, like two or three minimal responses for the week.

"The preferential syndrome." Some students may prefer to respond to particular students' posts rather than others. This may be because they established a good rapport with those students on the first day of class, and they feel they are responsible to continue the established relationship throughout the class sessions.

Class discussion tardiness. Some students, too, wait until the last hour of the deadline to post their initial comments or respond to peers. This causes them to rush through the comments and earlier posts of their peers without taking ample time to closely read, understand, and give constructive critiques to their peers.

Long, verbose posts. Some students go the extent of writing longer posts to demonstrate their intellectual acuteness on a given topic. This causes the other students to have a distaste for reading that particular student's posts each time in a discussion forum. They may feel like they do not have the time to do extensive readings from peers in addition to course readings and other class engagements. They then disregard such posts the moment they see them and search for a more concise and precise post that they can easily read and respond to.

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Recommendations

Considering the analysis of the merits and demerits of virtual class instruction and discussion forums, which are significant social studies instructional strategies and are pertinent in enhancing social studies instruction, the following eight recommendations are made for social studies instructors to aid in their virtual teaching and learning:

First, I recommend the use of a VoiceThread (VT) for virtual discussions. VT (www.voicethread.com) is a free cloud-based platform where students can effectively engage in audio and video discussions.

Second, instructors could be encouraged to design synchronous instructional time for whole-class introductions for building rapport on the first day of class. Every student should be asked to meet at a scheduled time, introduce themselves, and respond to each peer's introductory remarks. This will help all the students in the class build a network system among themselves, know of each other's academic interests, goals, and research, and choose to collaborate where research interests align.

Third, instructors are to encourage students to respond to peers who have not received responses to their initial posts before responding to other peers who have received numerous responses to their posts. This can ensure fairness in discussions and no student would feel left out in a discussion forum. When I noticed this problem of neglected posts, maybe due to a late post, I decided to respond to my colleagues whose posts received no responses before responding to others with several responses. When I started doing that, I equally received responses from those students to my comments made on their posts. It makes each student feel involved and appreciated in the class.

Fourth, instructors are to assign students various chapters of the reading to present to peers. This will bolster their presentation skills in e-learning. I have noticed that anytime the course readings are deconstructed and each student is assigned a chapter to present, the students approach the course readings differently. Each took the assigned chapter seriously and developed a good PowerPoint presentation that simplified the entire readings for the class. The other students took interest in reading and responding to the discussion threads. The social studies instructor is encouraged to actively engage in the discussions throughout the week. "PowerPoint enables a melding of textual and visual elements" (Bickford et. al., 2020, p. 17).

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Fifth, instructors are to encourage students to balance complimentary remarks with analytical peer constructive critiques to the responses of their peers during discussions. Most students prefer to give compliments to their peer's post than to critically analyze such posts, which is essential in social studies classroom instruction. The preference could be an attempt to equally receive complimentary remarks and no critiques on their posts, too. A constructive critique can encourage a good atmosphere for debate, which is another effective social studies instructional strategy. The teacher will serve as a facilitator for charting classroom debates and at the same time take due cognizance of the "classroom's social and emotional tension" (Bickford, et al. 2020, p. 19).

Sixth, there should be at least a video post, an audio post, or a picture with each student's responses. It enhances variety in the discussions, and it gives the other students an idea of who they are responding to in the discussion. When all the posts and responses are done through text, it can decrease the interest with which students approach the discussion posts. A student who sees a new post in a video or image format will be easily drawn to read and comment.

Seventh, instructors should work collaboratively with students on the first day of class, planning with the students an alternative means of continuing discussions and class assignments should there be any technological challenges. Prior to the virtual class, some supplementary measures and resources may be provided for students who face challenges with their audio and video devices and internet connections for presentations. Some students in the course of the virtual class encounter problems with their electronic devices, but when the instructor finds an alternative way to send assignments and responses, this alleviates fears about possible technological failures and missed deadlines.

Lastly, a formative and a summative assessment should characterize every virtual instruction and discussion. One way in which the instructor can formatively assess the students is by personally contributing to the discussion threads, especially through the VT platform. Anytime the students see their instructor post a comment to a presentation, a comment, or a question, it assures the students that their instructor is observing the discussion threads. It also encourages the students to respond to the instructors' comments and builds good rapport between the students and the instructors. Also, a summative assessment can be made by posting the grade scores of each responses of a student in their grade boxes. When students are able to track their day-to-day progress in the discussion and virtual class, they are encouraged to make informed choices in allocating time for their virtual classes and discussions.

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Conclusion

This essay accounts for and details the merits and demerits of social studies virtual instructional strategies of cooperative learning and discussions. It also discusses eight instructional recommendations for social studies instructors in delivery of an effective and comprehensive virtual instruction that fosters discussions and peer work among students during the Covid-19 global pandemic. The essay addresses how to create an awareness for instructors to consider when delivering virtual instruction during a pandemic. Implementation of the eight instructional recommendations can help foster social studies students' virtual classroom engagements, participation, and virtual learning experiences.

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VoiceThread: <https://voicethread.com>

About the Author:

Razak Kwame Dwomoh is a doctoral student, Social Studies Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, Purdue University. His research interests include the impact of post-colonial theory on social studies and history curricula in Africa and comparative aspects of educational reform in the U.S., social studies and history education (pedagogy and assessment), students' historical thinking, historical (mis) representations in U.S. and Ghanaian social studies and history trade and textbooks, the interface between religion and education, and how various forms of citizenship, multicultural citizenship, and global citizenship in particular, are conceptualized, rationalized, and thought in different educational systems.

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