

## Fostering Trust Through Learning Labs and Discussions

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### Abstract

This article is an evidence-based practice piece that proposes *Learning Labs* as a useful approach to teachers' professional learning about how to foster discussions. We share examples from two research projects involving different iterations of *Learning Labs for Social Studies* that supported teachers in promoting student learning through talk. We argue that *Learning Labs* can offer school leaders and practitioners a helpful approach to supporting teachers as they develop their professional practice and promote a shared culture of discourse.

### Key Words

discussion, discussion facilitation, professional development, teacher learning, social studies, civics, learning labs

## Introduction

Discussions represent a hallmark method for social studies instruction (Cuenca, 2021; NCSS, 2013), offering strong potential for practicing and sustaining democracy in schools. When done effectively, such discussions support the development of civic reasoning (Conklin et al., 2021) and skills, knowledge, and dispositions for democratic citizenship and civic engagement (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Parker, 2010). We argue that schools can promote more valuable discussion while strengthening instruction and professional development (referred to as PD)—powerful 3-for-1 payoff. By discussion, we mean dialogue that centers students’ voices in response to open-ended questions, where students build on each other’s ideas. We see this as distinct from teacher-centered talk that can be evaluative or emphasize “correct” responses.

Student-centered discussions remain rare, particularly in low-income elementary and secondary schools. Many teachers avoid discussions in social studies, citing concerns about classroom management, students’ emotional safety when discussing controversial issues, and the amount of time needed to prepare (Ho et al., 2017). In some states, simply talking about social and political issues is risky. Education scholar Rich Milner (2017) points out that such avoidance teaches anti-democratic lessons, keeping schools and educators complicit in ongoing harms.

Part of this avoidance may stem from a frequent challenge: fostering a culture of trust. Without trust there can be little meaningful talk. Teachers committed to discussion often work in isolation, and students without opportunities to discuss important topics risk apathy towards social studies content. This absence of discussion in social studies does little to alleviate broader societal polarization and democratic disengagement. Just as conversation is shared, so too must discussions

be a school-wide practice. Teachers need support navigating their roles and decisions during the incredible pace of student-centered discussion facilitation. To sustain democratic dialogue in schools requires educational leaders and teachers to cultivate the will, trust, and models best suited to their context.

Thus, we argue that educational leaders play a key role in strengthening and building schoolwide cultures of discussion. One promising path forward is bringing teachers together into classrooms to collectively work on discussion facilitation with students. *Learning Labs*—originally developed at the University of Washington in the context of elementary mathematics (Kazemi et al., 2024; Kazemi et al., 2018)—offer one approach. *Learning Labs* involve cycles of collaboration amongst educators where they can learn new content, co-plan, co-teach, and reflect together on student learning. Like discussions, *Learning Labs* require both talk and trust among participants. Below, we present two practical examples of *Learning Labs* supporting teachers’ successes in sustaining classroom discussions and building broader cultures of trust.

## Why Discussions?

Learning in democratic societies depends on transforming habits of talk. Moving from top-down models of knowledge transmission—in professional development or K-12 instruction—requires shifts towards collaborative leadership and participation practices.

Student-centered discussions support this shift in both content and form, positioning students and teachers as democratic participants, and not as distanced commentators (NCSS, 2013). Formats such as deliberation, debate, town meeting, and mock trial allow students to experience procedures and forms of

policy deliberation and consensus-building. With careful facilitation, explicit norms, and roles for participation, students authentically grapple with open issues and contemporary controversies. They can also bridge their experiential knowledge with enduring political themes. By centering student voices, discussions allow for more inclusive and public patterns of knowledge construction. They can encourage students to talk through the challenges that come with living together in pluralistic societies and schools.

With practice, and critical teacher and group reflection, such discussions also strengthen skills and dispositions for democratic citizenship (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). Students learn to transcend polarization to build shared understanding of key issues and evidence. Teachers and students can individually and collectively reflect on participation patterns, and which voices were amplified or ignored. Structures that support equity (e.g., turn-taking and participation norms) position all students as key participants—especially those from marginalized communities, whose experiences of democratic dysfunction and resilience are necessary for collectively seeking justice.

### **Why Learning Labs?**

In our experience, *Learning Labs* have been a

supportive structure for fostering a trusting environment where discussion can happen amongst students and educators. *Learning Labs* are site-embedded professional learning experiences where teachers and PD facilitators collectively come together to co-plan a lesson, enact this plan through co-teaching, debrief student learning, and reflect on takeaways for their teaching (Ghousseini et al., 2022; Kazemi et al., 2024; Kazemi et al., 2018; Kavanagh et al., 2022).

This iterative learning cycle engages teachers in public deliberation before, during, and after instruction, allowing them to engage in their own inquiry alongside students. Below, we share a graphic of the teacher learning cycle embedded in *Learning Labs for Social Studies* (Figure 1). Unlike lesson study, which also includes collaborative planning and debriefing, *Learning Labs* involve shared lesson facilitation amongst teachers and flexible planning done in a short timeframe (30-45 minutes). This flexibility is key because it creates space for teachers to experiment and make modifications while teaching the lesson. *Learning Labs* have been used to support teachers and students throughout K-12 across different subject areas including math, ELA, and social studies (Caasi et al., 2023; Gibbons et al., 2017; Kazemi et al., 2021; Monte-Sano, et al., 2023).

Figure 1

*Teacher Learning Cycle on a Learning Lab for Social Studies Professional Development (PD) Day*



The Learning Labs Cycle graphic was adapted by Chauncey Monte-Sano and the *Read.Inquire.Write.* team at the University of Michigan. The original version was created by Elham Kazemi and the *Teacher Education by Design* team at the University of Washington. The originals are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License by the *Read.Inquire.Write.* team at the University of Michigan, 2025. We use these materials with permission.

Through *Learning Labs*, teachers can engage in discussions as a routine practice to support inquiry, ongoing collaboration with other teachers, and a school culture that supports discussion and collaboration. Such regular opportunities to collaborate, understand and apply theory and practice with inquiry have strengthened teachers' enactment of open-ended and critical social studies discussions. Here, we share two different iterations of

*Learning Labs* that achieve these goals, one example embedded across one school year in one district, and the second is an adaptation of *Learning Labs* for a summer learning institute.

### **School Year, District-based Learning Labs for Social Studies**

*Learning Labs for Social Studies (LLSS)*, adapted from the original approach (Kazemi,

2018), supports social studies teachers with inquiry and equity-oriented teaching and learning (Monte-Sano, et al., 2023). Sarah Day Dayon worked on a research team, led by Chauncey Monte-Sano and Mary Schleppegrell, that partnered with 18 middle school social studies teachers. These teachers worked within a large Midwestern school district where approximately half of the students in the district qualified for English language support services at the time of the study.

We used the *Read.Inquire.Write.* (RIW) curriculum to establish a shared framework and language for inquiry teaching and to have a common, supportive anchor for *Learning Lab* PD days. Through one year of collective work with a shared purpose to support students' learning via inquiry teaching, we observed teachers increasingly center students' talk as they tried new ways to facilitate discussion with each other's support.

The examples we highlight below focus on data collected from one district-wide LLSS PD day, when teachers worked in cross-district, grade-level groups in 6-8th grade host teachers' classrooms (see Figure 1 for Schedule).

Throughout the PD, teachers worked in grade-level groups to co-plan lessons that they

then co-taught in a 6th, 7th, or 8th grade classroom. Sarah Day, a former high school history teacher and graduate research assistant, video recorded and transcribed the 6th grade group's conversation and co-teaching. The 6th-grade host teacher at Elm Middle School, Ben, oriented the group to where the class was in an inquiry unit about water inequality in and around Mexico City.

Based on this information, the teachers, district staff, and facilitators refined the lesson and decided in advance who would teach which segments of the lesson. They also identified opportunities for *Teacher Time Outs* (Gibbons et al., 2025), or moments to pause, think out loud about what they're noticing in students' thinking, or confer together about next steps during the co-teaching.

Teachers co-taught the same lesson twice to two different classes, then debriefed while analyzing student work.

We ended the day with a whole group reflection and future planning for social studies teaching in the district.

Focusing on student talk and student thinking was woven throughout this PD, and facilitators' questions reflected this common goal.

Table 1

*Learning Lab for Social Studies PD Day Schedule*

| <i>Hour</i> | <i>Activity</i>  |
|-------------|--|
| 1           | Learn new content: Centering student thinking; Develop a structure for co-teaching and “Teacher Time Outs” to discuss student thinking and instructional decisions<br><br>Co-plan the lesson in grade level groups (6th-grade) |
| 2           | Co-teach the lesson to Ben’s 2nd Hour Class of 6th-graders   |
| 3           | Analyze student thinking (discussion and student work) and debrief co-teaching<br><br>Co-plan the lesson based on what we learned  |
| 4           | Lunch Break  |
| 5           | Co-teach the lesson to Ben’s 5th Hour Class of 6th-graders   |
| 6 & 7       | Analyze student thinking (discussion and student work) and debrief co-teaching<br><br>Debrief experience across grade level groups and identify next steps for teachers’ inquiry and student learning                          |

At the end of PD day, teachers named the importance of co-teaching, collective learning, and supporting and looking for student talk and student learning as key parts of LLSS. In the first hour, some of the 6th grade teachers expressed hesitation, worried that there were going to be a lot of adults in the room during co-teaching. For example, Badia shared she was excited but it also “might be overwhelming” for teachers and students.

Reflecting at the end of the day after two rounds of co-teaching, she shared: “This is such a supportive and cordial space, usually in

another situation, maybe I’d be a bit nervous, something about it, the norms you set up, just made me feel very much at ease.” The norms facilitators set up before co-teaching included: 1) press for meaning and not just surface level talk, 2) counter tendencies to label themselves or students as being low-skilled or not competent, and 3) create safe spaces where people can engage with content, teaching, and learning.

Other teachers echoed the value of engaging in discussion with diverse groups of students, having a collaborative environment to

learn with other teachers, and having that learning situated within their colleagues' actual classrooms.

Teachers deepened their trust of each other, and strengthened student discourse with the debrief following the first round of co-teaching and using *Teacher Time Outs* during the second round. During the first debrief, teachers examined the student work they had collected from the first class.

Teachers noticed that students made connections to what they had learned in a previous class. They also identified places where they wanted to provide additional support to students in their next co-teaching hour by modeling how to read and analyze a map. Teachers asked small groups of students prompting questions about the maps to support students' understanding.

During the second iteration of co-teaching, one teacher named Hassnah, asked the host teacher, Ben, if she could ask students some additional questions during a discussion of one of the sources they were reading about water inequality in Mexico City. When he obliged, she asked students "Making connections to what just happened this past summer to our city. What happened? What failed in our city?"

Several students responded by discussing the flood in their city, which was caused by clogged sewers and pipes. Students further shared the impact of this flood on their school and homes. Her question moved the talk away from right-answer questions and into more expansive reasoning, allowing students to share personal experiences of a local water crisis, when their streets and basements flooded. Ben's openness to this pause demonstrated vulnerability and a building of trust with fellow co-teachers. Here, educators' actions supported a climate of trust and

reciprocity, while strengthening their approach to student talk. Through modeling, public deliberation, and feedback, teachers engaged with each other and students in a collective learning process.

Developing a culture of trust amongst teachers, school-wide and district-wide, was essential for cultivating collaboration. Teachers' debrief emphasized the value of positioning each other as experts, in contrast to PDs where teachers cannot witness or implement new approaches in practice. The facilitator reiterated, "I don't think this PD model will work if that isn't true... climate and trust."

The invitation to publicly make mistakes or be unsure of what steps to take next as a teacher also enabled collective learning. As Hassnah explained, "Thank you for not being critical or judgmental. It's okay if we make mistakes, and there's room for growth as professionals." Teachers' real time feedback and willingness to experiment with new instructional approaches underscored the benefits of discussion. It also made the teachers shared learning process visible to the students in the classroom. The students could see their teachers learning collaboratively from one another and having discussions parallel to the inquiry that students were engaging in.

One of the final activities of the day was a post-it note reflection where facilitators asked teachers what was supportive and not supportive of the day. Twenty-three post-its were placed on the "supportive" wall that mostly spoke to: the values of collaborating together in-person with other social studies teachers, co-teaching and reflecting on the co-teaching, and supporting student thinking and talk. Only nine post-its were on the "not supportive" wall, and those comments reflected wanting more district-wide, in-person PDs like this earlier in the school year. They also

thought it would be useful to have opportunities throughout the day to learn across grade-level groups.

Teachers' professional learning was also supported by the presence and active involvement of school and district leadership. The district social studies coordinator, Barbara, supported the logistics for planning the *Learning Lab* PD day and was present and engaged throughout the sessions. Barbara facilitated the final session of the day, which focused on curriculum mapping and a professional learning plan for the following year.

When asked to identify their top three priorities for future professional learning, every group of teachers from all three grade levels spoke about wanting to continue co-teaching via *Learning Labs*, and cross-district collaboration. We saw this eagerness from the teachers and the district to continue engaging in *Learning Labs*, even beyond our university partnership, as indicative of the possibilities of supporting a greater culture of classroom discussions.

In our *Learning Labs for Social Studies* PD Day, there was space for teachers to not just talk about supporting student discussions hypothetically. They could witness and actively engage in a process of centering student talk in the classroom alongside other educators. *Learning Labs* can provide useful opportunities for educators to work on their professional practice as discussion-facilitators and encourage discussions as a routine practice.

Given teachers' enactment of and reflections about *Learning Labs*, we saw increased potential for a district-wide culture of teacher collaboration, and more specifically, teacher collaboration that supports student-centered discussion.

## Summertime, Cross-District Learning Labs: DISCUSS

DISCUSS is a multi-year research project housed in two university-based teacher education programs, aiming to promote and sustain discussion facilitation practices of social studies teachers. Timothy Patterson leads the DISCUSS project with Abby Reisman, and Jenni Conrad, A.J. Schiera, Andrew del Calvo are part of its team of scholars from various institutions. For two summers, we brought together new teachers (in their 1st-3rd years) from nearby districts with roughly 100 high school youths for week-long *Learning Labs* on a college campus. Since our *Learning Labs* were during the summer, inviting youth was essential for supporting teacher learning about discussion.

In our first *Learning Lab*, participants were grouped by subject (e.g. U.S. history, world history, etc.) and tasked with developing a unit of instruction to teach in the coming school year. The participants rehearsed discussions with a group of youth, received feedback from them, and iterated their plans based on youth feedback. We aimed for activities that centered participants' agency and triggered exploration of their identities as teachers.

Given the challenging nature of discussion facilitation and vulnerability our participants would likely feel, it was crucial we create a safe environment in which they could explore (Kaplan et al., 2014). We accomplished this by positioning students as experts and inviting their feedback. This framing of student expertise required participants to trust and support each other in developing and iterating their units of instruction. Likewise, students had to feel trusted that their ideas were taken seriously by the participants and us as teacher educators.

The second *Learning Lab* took a different approach, explicitly positioning the teachers as researchers of a dilemma they faced when facilitating discussions. First, the group discussed and revised draft norms for working together based on Free Minds, Free People's guidelines, including “we are all teachers and learners,” the need to “be aware of power and voice in the room,” and together “ensure this is a safe and respectful space.”

Teachers then identified dilemmas of practice meaningful for them, which the organizers used to form groups. Groups developed a shared inquiry question to explore through various “activities co-investigating teaching” with youth, all supported by teacher educators, to help them explore their dilemmas with students. Organizers prepared the students for their role by watching a sample clip of teacher facilitation, discussing its strengths and limitations together, and ways of offering constructive feedback to teachers.

When teachers and students first came together, each group started by appreciating students, and their role in teacher learning: “you have expertise in teaching, even if you don’t know it!” For 12th grader Jacky, this experience involved youth from different schools “coming together to help improve and provide feedback to teachers so they can improve their teaching methods.”

Both *Learning Labs* were successful, but the second’s focus on discussion as a phenomenon, rather than delivering an effective lesson, allowed for deeper exploration of teacher practices and reflection. While both versions included icebreakers and team-building activities (e.g., bingo), the intentionality and time for norm-setting and teacher identification of shared goals and dilemmas in the second also seemed to foster deeper collaboration and trust.

*Learning Labs* typically take place across one department, while our participants worked in dozens of schools. However, the presence of local district leaders helped buoy teacher enthusiasm and align learning. Two social studies curriculum supervisors facilitated activities with the teachers and supported their reflections.

Two teachers, Maddie and Erica, worked in the same school and department and frequently collaborated. Both advanced their practice to the point where their students serve as discussion facilitators, with Maddie and Erica on the periphery of discussions. This signals the potentials of *Learning Labs* for sustaining teacher collaboration and trust with discussion facilitation. In an interview during her second year of teaching, Erica credited her and Maddie’s persistence in cultivating fully student-centered discourse by saying, “I don’t think we would have tried discussions without DISCUSS.”

### **Implementing Learning Labs: Key Ideas for Getting Started**

*Learning Labs* can be logistically demanding, but many schools, from the most to least well-resourced, have found ways to implement them meaningfully. Several projects using *Learning Labs* have developed common principles for supporting teacher learning (Dutro et al., under review).

Teacher Education by Design (TEDD) offers free examples, a planning guide, norms protocol, and more at <https://tedd.org/learning-labs/>. RIW includes free *Learning Lab* resources for social studies at <https://readinquirewrite.umich.edu/>. Some key planning elements include:

- **Provide subs and common planning time for teachers.** Support teachers’ full participation in *Learning Labs*.

- **Establish norms and create structures for support.** See the links above. LLs can support the shifts from teacher-dominated talk to more meaningful student-centered discourse.
- **Organize teachers in ways most supportive of their learning.** Grade-level teams, subject-specific groups across grade levels, within a single school building, or across a district can be used.
- **Coordinate opportunities over time with different learning environments and collaborations.** A *Learning Lab* is not something that should only be done once, and it will not fully address teacher learning needs. Rather, it is an approach that can be integrated and coordinated with other learning settings and experiences to support teachers to develop their practice in relation to their own students (Kazemi et al., 2024).

## Conclusion

These examples speak to the possibilities that emerge when teachers are given the time, space, and support to work collaboratively to learn with one another and improve upon their discussion facilitation skills, through continued practice, in context, with students. *Learning Labs for Social Studies* (LLSS) provided a district and site-embedded example during the school year.

The teachers' debrief about the *Learning Lab* demonstrated a collective commitment to continued inquiry and working with colleagues in the context of their classrooms to foster greater discussion culture and teacher learning. While teachers shared initial hesitations and fears, we saw a shift in framing and an eagerness from the teachers and the district to continue engaging in *Learning Labs* on their own, even when the university partnership was coming to close. DISCUSS was a summer professional learning experience

for early career teachers and demonstrated the significance of having a PD focused on dilemmas of practice when facilitating discussion.

The project also emphasized the value of youth participation in summer professional learning. Both projects showed how teachers could work collaboratively to support discussion rather than avoiding the practice altogether or attempting to facilitate in isolation without support. They also highlighted the importance of having school/district leaders and curriculum supervisors engaged in professional development alongside classroom teachers.

The two cases shared from LLSS and DISCUSS are snapshots of larger empirical studies that examine inquiry and discussion in social studies classrooms and teacher learning. Here, we focus on teachers' and school/district leaders' involvement and reflections on the value of *Learning Labs* for building trust and sustaining discussion.

Elsewhere, we and our colleagues have offered more detailed examinations of these *Learning Labs* at work, with a particular emphasis on the role of youth in informing teachers' evolving ideas on student talk and civic discussions (e.g. Jay et al., 2022; Jennings et al., 2022; Monte-Sano et al., 2023; Monte-Sano et al., under review; Schiera & del Calvo, 2025).

*Learning Labs* offer one powerful way schools and districts can embed and sustain discussions and trust within their instructional cultures. The positive experiences of the teachers, school leaders, and students across both our projects suggest the promise of *Learning Labs* as an approach for supporting teachers' professional learning and building a larger culture of discussion. These insights provide practical examples that might be of

interest to teachers, schools, districts, teacher education programs, and educational researchers seeking to build stronger cultures of classroom-based discussions. Rather than putting the onus on individual teachers to facilitate discussions in isolation, this approach offers an integrative approach to teacher professional learning, improving instructional

practice, and engagement with inquiry and discussion. Knowing the limited presence and oftentimes absence of discussion in schools, we encourage school and district leaders to not shy away from discussion, but instead, work with teachers and create space for teachers to come together for collaborative learning.

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