



THE DEMOCRACY PROJECT

V. ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

4. STRUCTURED ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY (SAC)

What is a Structured Academic Controversy?

A Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) is a framework for discussion that moves students beyond “either/or” debates to a more nuanced historical, social, political and/or cultural synthesis.

Rationale

By the time students reach adolescence, many believe that every issue comes neatly packaged in a “pro/con” format, and that the goal of classroom discussion is to defeat, rather than to understand, your opponent. The SAC method provides an alternative to the “debate mindset” by shifting the goal from winning classroom discussions to understanding alternative positions and formulating historical syntheses. The SAC’s structure demands that students listen to each other in new ways and helps guide them into a world of complex and controversial ideas.

Description

The SAC was developed by cooperative learning researchers David and Roger Johnson of the University of Minnesota as a way to provide structure and focus to classroom discussions. Working in pairs and then coming together in four-person teams, students explore a question by reading about and then presenting contrasting positions. Afterwards, they engage in discussion to reach consensus. (Note that consensus need not always be the goal when engaging with contentious topics. But the *pursuit* of consensus can be a valuable skill for students to develop.)

Below you’ll find directions for preparing the SAC, classroom instructions for

students, and two sample sources on the topic of economic inequality.

SAC: Teacher Preparation

1. Develop a Question that lends itself to contrasting viewpoints. Some question examples include:

- Provocative: "Is Abraham Lincoln worthy of the title "The Great Emancipator"?"
- Contestable: "Was dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki necessary to defeat the Japanese?"
- Hypothetical: "Could the Constitution have been ratified if slavery had been abolished?"

We illustrate the SAC below with the question "Does the government need to take a more active role in the economy to help minimize economic inequality?" But many other questions included in *The Democracy Project* lend themselves to this technique.

2. Resource Selection Select 2-4 documents (primary or secondary) that include compelling arguments/evidence for each side. To get started, we suggest using the following sources:

- a. [Abbreviated Version](#) of [Cato Institute: Chris Edwards and Ryan Bourne's "Exploring Wealth Inequality"](#)
- b. [Abbreviated Version](#) of [Brookings Institution: Zia Qureshi's "Rising Inequality: A Major Issue of Our Time"](#)

Note: There are a number of valuable sources in [Contours of Debate: Sources on Economic Inequality](#). These excerpts are from two sources in that section.

3. Timing The time you will need for a SAC that uses about four documents will depend on the amount of experience your students have with sourcing/annotating documents, using this type of structure and the sophistication and complexity of the documents. An introduction (or review) of analyzing documents can be a helpful starting point. Plan on using 1-2 class periods, depending on the variables above.

In the Classroom

While the SAC has been modified and adapted countless times by researchers and teachers, the technique has five basic steps ([Handout 1 & 2](#)):

I. Partners Prepare

1. Present the topic and question. Organize students into four-person teams comprised of two dyads. Inform students that each dyad will assume one side of the argument.
2. Distribute document packet to each dyad for review.
3. Instruct each dyad to prepare their position using the best evidence. They are not required to use every document—and may, in fact, find multiple pieces of evidence in a single document. See Handout 2, which will help

students track their analysis and prepare their positions.

II. Position Presentation

4. Dyads come together as a four-person team and present their evidence to one another, with one dyad acting as the presenters and the other as listeners.
5. After presenters are finished, the listening dyad repeats back to presenters what they understood. Listeners are not refuting or debating the other side's position at this time. Presenters must be fully satisfied that the listeners have demonstrated an understanding of their position before continuing.
6. Switch roles: the listeners become the presenters and repeat Steps 4 and 5.

III. Build Consensus

7. After each side presents, the dyads abandon their original positions and work to reach consensus based on the most compelling evidence. If consensus proves unattainable, the team clarifies where their differences lie.

Helpful Tips

Students' tendencies towards argument and debate start early and run deep. Even when told that they need to understand—not contest—an opposing position, students will try to find holes in their opponent's positions and aim to refute them. Our recommendations:

- Introduce (or review) the skill of "[active listening](#)" and have students practice in their dyads for a few minutes. Students may use such sentence frames as:
 - "Let me make sure I heard you correctly. Did you say..."
 - "What I heard was..."
- Establish the following rule: "Do not interrupt the presenters; jot down notes when the argument requires clarity."
- Post the procedures or distribute as handouts for easy reference.
- As students start to see other perspectives and nuances in the materials, *the absence of a certain answer may confuse them*. Reassure students that uncertainty and complexity are expected during this activity. Encourage them to make notes that specify their confusion, new ideas, or questions.

The [two handouts](#) will help you introduce and set up this activity, along with your selected source documents. Each dyad should get all of the documents.

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