Facilitating Discussion of Controversial Issues: Digital Practice Space

Taylor M. Kessner, Arizona State University, tkessner@asu.edu
Joshua Littenberg-Tobias, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, jltobias@mit.edu
Katrina Kennett, The University of Montana Western, katrina.kennett@umwestern.edu
Sara J. Kaka, Ohio Wesleyan University, sjkaka@owu.edu
Anthony Tuf Francis, Oakland University, akfranci@oakland.edu
G. R. Marvez, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, marvezgr@gmail.com
Justin Reich, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, jreich@mit.edu
Essence Smith, Trinity College, essence.smith@trincoll.edu

Abstract: This study describes preliminary results from incorporating digital simulations into four pre-service teacher preparation courses to help develop adaptive expertise in facilitating discussions of controversial issues. Faculty at four teacher preparation programs implemented two modules of *Discussion Leader*, a digital facilitation practice space. Instructors and used common instructional frameworks and pre-post assessments (N = 31). Initial evidence suggests *Discussion Leader* helped pre-service teachers develop self-awareness and reflect on their own performance—a crucial step toward developing facilitation expertise.

Background and theory of learning

Amidst the current political landscape of "fake news" and "alternative facts," teachers' ability to facilitate classroom discussion around controversial issues has perhaps never been needed more. Yet facilitation is a complex skill requiring a suite of technical subskills (e.g., Beck, 2005; Hess & Mcavoy, 2015). While some of these strategies can be prepared in advance, in-the-moment facilitation is an improvisational endeavor, requiring "adaptive expertise," flexibly responding to the context and character of each discussion (Wetzel, De Arment, & Reed, 2015). The long-held view within the learning sciences community that *what* one learns and becomes able to do cannot be separated from *how* one learns it powerfully suggests a way forward (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Greeno & Gresalfi, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Learning experiences that build practitioners' self-awareness and reflection capacities can improve adaptive expertise (Hatano & Oura, 2003; Anthony, Hunter, & Hunter, 2015), thus better preparing preservice teachers to facilitate these types of discussions. Although teaching simulations have shown promise as a method of improving pre-service teacher practice (e.g., Dotger, 2015; McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013), existing methods often incorporate live actors, which can be cost- and resource-prohibitive for many teacher education programs. Digital simulations may offer a less cost- and resource-intensive alternative. Nevertheless, little research exists on such simulations and their effectiveness. *Discussion Leader*, an online digital practice space in which teacher candidates can experiment with and test teacher moves relevant to facilitating discussion around controversial issues, offers a promising opportunity to further research in this area.

Study design

Acknowledging that any technological innovation is only as good as the educational ecosystem in which it is implemented (Toyama, 2015), we took an ecological approach (Barab & Roth, 2006) to designing a lesson cycle on leading discussions of controversial issues. This lesson cycle used iterative cycles of anticipation, enactment, reflection, and debriefing around digital simulations (see Figure 1).
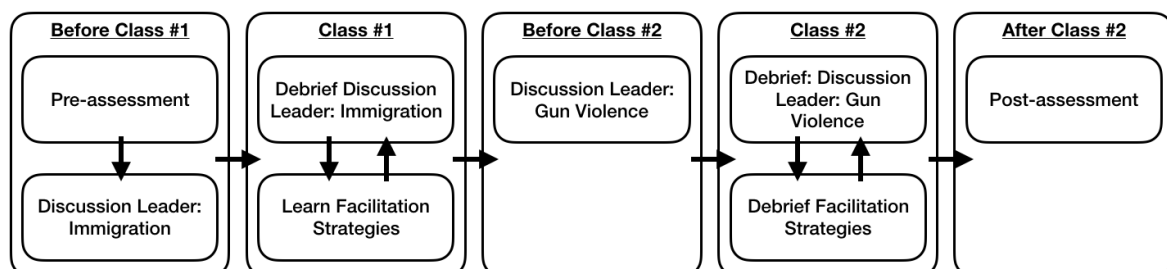

Figure 1. Unit Design Incorporating Digital Simulations.

Preliminary findings

Initial evidence from the post-assessments suggests that integrating digital simulations can increase participants' self-awareness about their own performance and aid them in making connections to the kinds of teacher moves they might employ in their future classrooms (Table 1).

Table 1: Selected Responses from Debrief and Post Assessment: What did you find useful (or not) about Discussion Leader?

	Response
#1	[Discussion Leader] helped me through a simulation that made me realize my strengths, as well as what needs to be improved.
#2	It was incredibly useful and giving some insight into tough questions and situations we may run into as teachers in these situations
#3	[Discussion Leader] helped me see how [much] more my choice would lead to a good discussion. I found that the more textual evidence that I integrated into my discussion the more successful the conversation ended up being
#4	I really felt myself wanting to shut [the conversation] down—[Discussion Leader] helped me recognize how nervous this stuff makes me, and it's a good way to practice getting comfortable with being uncomfortable
#5	We don't get enough opportunities to practice doing stuff like this in our regular courses, so I found the simulation really helpful for getting a feel for what facilitating hard discussions will be like when I enter the classroom

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