Diversity: Approaches to Building Conceptual Understanding in the Social Studies classroom

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Abstract

With the heightened emphasis placed on students’ understanding of core content or key concepts in the 2016 Social Studies curriculum in secondary schools, it remains of utmost interest for the social studies teacher to revisit some of the key strategies and beliefs involved in building conceptual understanding in the classroom. This pedagogy was developed to strengthen students’ understanding and appreciation of key concepts and principles while encouraging them to apply these concepts to their understanding of the world around them. This article thus seeks to explore the various pedagogical beliefs, instructional strategies and challenges that would be applicable for the classroom teacher in the conduct of the new Social Studies syllabus. For the purpose of this article, we will be touching on the concept of diversity to anchor our discussions. Having a good grasp of the key concept of diversity is an essential part of students' learning as this concept forms the building blocks for gaining a better understanding about the issue on “Living in a Diverse Society.”

Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Singapore introduced a new Social Studies syllabus in 2016, which presents a paradigm shift in the teaching of the subject. Rather than the traditional content-based mode of teaching, the new syllabus emphasises an issue-based pedagogy that revolves around student mastery of core content (key concepts) and dynamic content (case studies). This pedagogy was developed to strengthen students’ understanding and appreciation of key concepts and principles while encouraging them to apply these concepts to their understanding of the world around them. The revised syllabus revolves around three broad issues: citizenship and governance, diverse society, and globalisation.
Table 1. Issues and Concepts for the new Social Studies Syllabus (MOE, 2015)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Inquiry Focus</th>
<th>Key concepts</th>
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<td>Exploring Citizenship and Governance</td>
<td>Working for the good of society:</td>
<td>• Citizenship</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Whose responsibility is it?</td>
<td>• Trade-offs</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Governance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living in a Diverse Society</td>
<td>Living in a diverse society:</td>
<td>• Identity</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Is harmony achievable?</td>
<td>• Diversity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Harmony</td>
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<td>• Assimilation</td>
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<td>• Integration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being Part of a Globalised World</td>
<td>Being part of a globalised world:</td>
<td>• Globalisation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Is it necessarily good?</td>
<td>• Interconnections</td>
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<td>• Interdependence</td>
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<td>• Hybridisation</td>
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With the heightened emphasis placed on students’ understanding of core content or key concepts, it remains of utmost interest for the social studies teacher to revisit some of the key strategies and beliefs involved in building conceptual understanding in the classroom. This paper thus seeks to explore the various pedagogical beliefs, instructional strategies and challenges that would be applicable for the classroom teacher in the conduct of the new Social Studies syllabus. For the purpose of this paper, we will be touching on the concept of diversity to anchor our discussions.

Conceptual understanding and diversity

Before we explore some approaches to building conceptual understanding, it would be useful to delineate the concept of ‘conceptual understanding’. Concepts can be perceived as abstractions of the ideas and characteristics of the phenomena we wish to describe. They “group certain facts together and help organize them and make sense of them by revealing patterns of similarity of difference” (Barr, Graham, Keown, & McGee, 1997). Conceptual understanding, on the other hand, may refer to what is being understood by the use of a concept in a specific context. For example the abstract concept of ‘diversity’ can be understood in terms of its more concrete attributes such as differences in age, gender, race or religion. Given that concepts tend to exist in the abstract, it is important for students to build conceptual understanding in order to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon that is being looked at.

Concepts help students to organise new information by categorising groups of facts according to patterns of similarity and difference. From these patterns, students form their framework or schema for each concept. This process is a method of enabling students to develop their own way of viewing the world. (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2009)
Therefore, to inculcate students with the ability to make sense of the complex world, it is important to foster their competency in conceptualising phenomena using appropriate conceptual frameworks. As opposed to traditional methods of rote learning, students empowered with strong conceptual understanding may perceive concepts more holistically and apply that knowledge more broadly across other related subjects of inquiry. Moreover, students will be able to learn, understand and retain their knowledge of the concepts they are taught.

Why diversity?

Having a good grasp of the key concept of diversity is an essential part of students' learning as this concept forms the building blocks for gaining a better understanding about the issue on “Living in a Diverse Society.” It also provides students with sound conceptual frameworks to develop their own way of structuring their understandings about the issue being presented. Moreover, in an increasingly globalised world today, the teaching of the concept of diversity becomes ever more relevant to ensure harmony in our multi-racial society. The lack of awareness and understanding of diversity could supplant societal cohesiveness and contribute tensions and conflicts between the diverse communities. Hence, it is of utmost importance to equip and empower our students to understand and respond to diversity appropriately.

Nevertheless, we are not claiming that the teaching of the concept of diversity has no precedence within our education system. Concepts of diversity have been explored and discussed even in the previous Social Studies curriculum. However, we believe that the concept of diversity can (and should) no longer be taught in the same way it has been done in the past. For instance, some teachers used to provide the definition of diversity without much discussion on the concept. A mere definition of diversity would not allow students to have a grasp of the concept or help to understand complex relationships. A key reason for this change is the very dynamics of the 21st century Social Studies classroom, which is undeniably becoming more diverse with student profiles spanning across various nationalities, ethnicities and cultures. We are no longer preparing our students for diversity but teaching diversity to a diverse audience. The understanding of such a change will dramatically affect the way we teach these concepts. It will affect how we prepare the classroom environment for discussions on the topic, which now requires greater sensitivity and specific content knowledge. The classroom teacher may also tap on the varied experiences of classroom participants to provide a more authentic learning experience for the students. Pedagogical strategies may explore problem solving techniques that tap on the strengths of diverse profiles of students to accomplish particular tasks. The pedagogical opportunities to explore concepts of diversity are aplenty.

Instructional strategies for teaching diversity

In general, the concept of diversity has been weaved into Issue Two: Living in a Diverse Society of the new Social Studies syllabus (MOE, 2015). The issue can be sub-categorised further into four chapters: (1) What is diversity? (2) Why is there greater diversity in Singapore? (3) What are the experiences and effects of living in a diverse society? (4) How can we respond in a diverse society? In this section, we will review and explore two useful instructional strategies, discussion-based as well as inquiry-based, that can help facilitate the teaching of the concept of
diversity as well as other big ideas such as stereotypes and prejudices. In the use of discussion-based approaches to conceptual learning, we are keen on engaging learners in meaningful conversations and to deepen conceptual understanding by tapping on their existing prior knowledge. An inquiry-based approach, while also discursive in nature, is primarily aimed at fostering greater student ownership of learning while allowing for self-discovery and exploration. In the case of both approaches, an iterative process of asking good questions remain essential. Our discussions of the above-mentioned approaches in this paper are guided by our own classroom experiences and should therefore not be understood as conclusive of the merits or demerits of each approach. After all, the classroom learning process is fundamentally influenced by a series of variable factors such as student profile or teacher experience. Nevertheless, we hope that our transparency, particularly in addressing some of the challenges and limitations we face in the use of these pedagogical strategies, will be useful to the fraternity.

Discussion-based strategies

As mentioned earlier, the 21st century classroom is one of great diversity. An example to prove this would be the increasing proportion of international students (IS) in our schools today. Each of these students that enter the classroom bring with them their own stories – stories ranging from their family’s decision for relocation, the integration process and even day-to-day encounters they may have with Singaporeans. Such experiences of our students bring about a great potential for authentic learning. To this end, it is useful for the 21st century classroom teacher to understand the significance of meaningful dialogue in the teaching of concepts such as diversity in the classroom. This strategy is especially relevant in today’s context, given how curriculum approaches are increasingly geared towards students becoming “architects of their own education” where inquiry and discussions become an increasingly preferred mode of understanding among students (Eisner, 2003; Malloy, Rogers, & Cridland-Hughes, 2015). From a pedagogical point of view, Eisner (2003) also suggests that meaningful discussion and inquiry could “lead to critical reading and listening and the formation of articulate and thoughtful responses.” The effective classroom teacher should therefore be receptive in promoting teacher-student and student-student dialogue, so that they can tap on the diverse experiences and perspectives of their peers (Sinnema & Aitken, 2012).

Example of discussion-based activity

To illustrate how educators can tap on dialogue and meaningful conversations to teach the concept of diversity, we will examine a simple facilitation activity and discuss some of the strengths and challenges of such an activity. The Four Squares activity is a simple facilitation activity that gives students an overview of the differences in cultural practices, lifestyle habits and beliefs amongst students even within the same classroom. It is a profiling activity aimed at facilitating dialogue between teachers and students in the classroom on the concept of diversity. Of course, the ability of the classroom teacher to facilitate meaningful discussions remains paramount in such an activity. This activity will tap on Hilda Taba’s strategies for effective questioning to bring about meaningful conversations in the classroom (Taba, 1969). Through the use of structured models for discussions that comprise series of sequenced, open-ended questions, Taba (1969) argues that students’ conceptual development can be
greatly enhanced. A summary of this activity is provided in the following table.

Table 2. Sample activity for teaching diversity

| Stage 1: Setting the stage | The teacher begins the lesson by introducing lesson objectives to the class. The teacher then provides a brief explanation of the relevance of the topic to the students’ daily lives. The teacher then begins to explain the simple facilitation game to the class and instructs the students to stand anywhere around the four squares, which are marked down, by tape or cone. The teacher goes through the general rules of the activity, bearing in mind the need to ensure a safe environment for discussion and exchange of thoughts between all students in the classroom. The students will stand around the four squares in preparation for the activity. |
| Stage 2: Reflective Decision-Making / Class-profiling | While the students are standing around the four squares, the teacher flashes options (on projector screen) geared towards answering the question of “Which do I resonate with most?” Each question will provide four options, which will correspond to the box area marked on the floor by the teacher beforehand. Students will be given one minute to reflect on the choices provided and move into one of the demarcated boxes that they identify with the most. An example of a possible question is to ask students which race category they resonate with the most. The projector screen will show the four main race categories in Singapore (e.g. Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others) as possible options for students. Students will then move into one of the boxes they can identify with. Students will be allowed to remain at the outskirts of the four boxes, if they resonated with none of the options given. After each question is asked, the students will tally the number of students in each category and fill up a class profiling worksheet provided. Another example of a possible profiling question is to ask students about their lifestyle choices. The four options could be related to modes of transport that the student resonates with the most (e.g. cars, buses, bicycles, foot). The profiling data obtained could be used to discuss about issues pertaining to lifestyle choices resulting from one’s socio-economic status. Some other possible categories to feature: - Religion |
- Lifestyle choices (linked to socio-economic status)
- Nationality
- Language

| Stage 3: Facilitating discussions | After each question is asked, the teacher will facilitate a discussion with the students in the class. Using Taba’s strategy for effective questioning, the teacher will ask some students of each group an opening question, interpretive question and capstone question (Taba, 1969).

_A possible sequence is shown below:_

1. What makes you identify with this option? (Opening)
2. How is your experience different from the other groups? (Interpretive)
3. Is this an important part of your identity? Why so? (Capstone)

After each group has shared, students are allowed to build on the responses of others and are encouraged to ask probing questions to clarify their doubts. At the end of the students’ sharing, the teacher will attempt to draw similarities and differences between the experiences of various groups. It must be highlighted that the teacher should also seek to get students who did not identify with any of the categories to share about why they chose to sit out and their struggles with identifying with any of the groups presented. This is of great importance in the teaching of diversity and it will subsequently provide the teacher with a good starting point to teach about marginalised communities and the challenges of responding to diversity in Singapore.

The cycle repeats as the teacher poses a new question, with a new set of options for students to respond to. The teacher will continue to facilitate discussions at the end of each round, with each round geared towards a particular factor giving rise to diversity in Singapore.

| Stage 4: Conclusion | The teacher draws the activity to an end by getting the class to recognise the diversity of their own class, drawing special attention to race, religion, nationality and socio-economic status as factors that give rise to diverse identities within the classroom. By the end of the activity, the students will be exposed to the different cultural and economic experiences of the class.

**Strengths and weaknesses**

In the execution of the above-mentioned activity in a class of 20 secondary three students, one observation quickly made by the class was that of the racial composition. The participating class quickly figured out that there was a large
proportion of Chinese students in the class, in relation to that of other races. The physical segregation of the class into distinct categories (which revealed the majority vs. minority groups) allowed for the teacher to lead a spontaneous discussion about discrimination, race-relations and other issues relating to the notion of privileges afforded to the majority race. The activity allowed for the exchange of ideas and feelings by different groups of students pertaining to race matters. While this issue is contentious and sensitive in nature, the ability of the teacher to facilitate a meaningful discussion will make such dialogues a powerful tool for social justice, perspective building and empathy development in our students. It forces our students, however uncomfortably, to reflect on their own quotidian practices and think critically about the various stereotypes and prejudices that they may encounter or unknowingly perpetuate about other races.

Ultimately, the Four Squares activity is a simple facilitation exercise that seeks to provide a broad overview of diversity in the class. It seeks to facilitate greater understanding of the concept of diversity by tapping on the diverse experiences of the students themselves. However, the value of such an activity also lies in the visual impact it has on the students as they move from one box area to another and observe their decisions in relation to that of others. The visual impact of those who fail to identify with any of the main categories and are stranded aside provides a significant teaching opportunity on marginalised communities in our society. The activity will indefinitely provide multiple opportunities for teacher to facilitate discussions of various critical issues pertaining to the concept of diversity. While the teacher may not bring these topics up during the activity itself, the students’ findings recorded in the class profile worksheet provides a good resource for the teacher to tap on when attempting to discuss other diversity related issues subsequently.

However, one quickly realises that the effectiveness of the adopted strategy is largely dependent on the teacher’s ability to generate meaningful dialogue. Billingsley (2000) describes the pedagogy of teaching by discussion to place “a heavy burden” on the classroom teacher. The teacher is not merely a deliverer of content but one who needs to be proficient in eliciting students’ responses and conscientiously strives to weave a coherent and logical narrative using these responses. The level of readiness and proficiency of the classroom teacher to partake in such a pedagogical strategy is thus a great limiting factor which would predetermine the effectiveness of a discussion-based pedagogy.

Possible solutions

To address this limitation, the classroom teacher may seek to develop competencies, particularly in the aspect of questioning techniques, to better equip oneself as a teacher facilitator in the classroom. To build up confidence in facilitating dialogues, one may consider forecasting and planning how you could build up a point from a student response and connect them with wider issues to be explored. An appropriately sequenced list of questions (otherwise known as question scripting) may also help to direct student response towards a more focused conclusion (Beal, Bolick, & Martorell, 2009). While there are many different strategies that one can employ (See Evans & Saxe, pp. 85-86, 1996), the above discussion-based activity shows how pre-planned questioning script (using Taba’s questioning script) could help in achieving specific instructional objectives (SIO).
To facilitate dialogue among students, the general atmosphere of the classroom environment also plays an important part in influencing student participatory levels in discussion-based activities. The teacher may consider adopting new strategies for eliciting responses from students. For instance, teacher questions could be minimised and replaced with more teacher statements. The teacher could use “That’s interesting…tell us more” or “So you’re saying…” instead of “What do you think” or “Why is that so?” (Sinnema & Aitken, 2012). Such a shift in questioning styles helps promote greater dialogue among students by setting a nurturing tone to the classroom environment.

In addition, it is also important for the classroom teacher to provide a safe environment for the exchange of ideas, thoughts and feelings among students. Fundamental to all discussion-based activities is the belief that “student learning is promoted by respectful and productive teacher-student and student-student relationships” (Sinnema & Aitken, 2012). Research has shown that respectful relationships play an important role in creating a conducive classroom environment for dialogue (Alton-Lee, Nuthall & Patrick, 1995). This is particularly so in the context of our new Social Studies syllabus which probes into contentious issues that many of our students can identify and relate with. Hence, the teacher facilitator will need to be extremely well-versed with the various anticipatory measures and strategies that could prevent conflict from occurring (British Columbia Department of Education & Training, 2008). The teacher should always establish clear guidelines for acceptable classroom behaviour and monitor students closely. At the most fundamental level, teacher facilitators may consider Billingsley’s (2000) suggestions for effective dialogue:

1. Create an environment of trust and mutual respect
2. Celebrate everyone and denigrate no one
3. Minority communities be viewed and treated as individuals, rather than categories

The teacher facilitator should also be sensitive to inherited prejudices and stereotypes, as well as deep seated feelings of guilt, anger and frustration which are stirred up by discussions of diversity (Billingsley, 2000). In such situations, the teacher facilitator should remain calm and instead of assuming an authoritative position (which could warrant further aggression), aim to always acknowledge the student’s perspective. That act of acknowledging and respecting a student’s point of view helps in alleviating the tension in the classroom. Instead of rebutting students in such situations, the teacher could leave them with questions to set them thinking deeper about their perspectives and take the discussion further in a small group setting out of the class. Such a response undertaken by the teacher helps to manage the conflict and ensure that students do not feel deprived of an opportunity of voicing their opinions. This works well in portraying the classroom as an embodiment of the democratisation process.

Inquiry-based approach

Besides the discussion-based strategy, the inquiry-based approach which teachers are familiar with can also be used to make sense of abstract concepts. Instead of the mere teacher presentation of facts, the inquiry approach seeks to transfer ownership of learning to students themselves, prompting them to ask meaningful questions and find answers on
their own (Boomer, 1992). This process, according to Cook (1992), will compel learners to take on the role of an “educational decision maker”, “working harder and better...discovering their own ideas...asking constructive questions and fight hard to answer them for themselves.” The inquiry-based learning process typically involves a four stage cyclical process (MOE):

1. Sparking Curiosity
2. Gathering Data
3. Exercising Reasoning
4. Reflective Thinking

This is an example of how the inquiry-based approach in the form of Issue Investigation can be used to facilitate students’ learning of the concept of diversity.

**Example of Issue Investigation project**

To illustrate how the inquiry-based approach can be used to facilitate students’ learning of the concept of diversity; we will be using the example of Issue Investigation. Set as a performance task, Issue Investigation provides a platform for students to demonstrate the knowledge, skills and values needed to active citizenship. Students are tasked to conduct detailed investigations on societal issues of interest to them (MOE, 2016). A summary of the activity is provided in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Sample Issue Investigation.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Is Diversity Beneficial?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 1: Sparking Curiosity</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| The teacher begins the lesson by introducing lesson objectives to the class. The teacher than provides a brief explanation of the relevance of the topic to the students’ daily lives.

Adopting the Chalk-Talk instructional strategy, the class will be divided into groups of four and will write down possible benefits of diversity in a society. They will be guided with a series of photographs depicting prominent fusion dishes, fashion trends and music. The teacher will then facilitate a discussion on the benefits of diversity in a society with the class. The activity ends with a quick summary of the benefits of diversity.

Next, the teacher will ask the class if they think diversity is always beneficial for society. The teacher will explicitly inform students of the inquiry question “Is Diversity Beneficial?”

| **Stage 2: Setting the stage**        |
| In their groups, students will be informed that they will investigate on the tensions and challenges that might arise in a diverse society. Each group will be tasked to look at the concept of diversity from a different angle. The four categories are: |
| 1. **Nationality**                    |
| 2. **Race**                           |
| 3. **Religion**                       |
4. Socio-economic Status

Depending on the choice of the group, students will be provided with a reading package that highlights some of the tensions related to the specific category chosen by the group. (i.e. A group investigating on the impacts of religious diversity will be provided a different set of reading materials from another group investigating on diversity of nationalities.) These articles will provide the necessary background information required for further investigative work. At the same time, these articles also provide some guidance in terms of the direction the group may choose to take in their investigation.

The students are informed that they will have to do a presentation (using Google Slides) to the class at the end of their research.

Stage 3: Gathering Data
To gain more insight on the topic at hand, groups are informed that they will be required to survey the public for their opinions towards diversity and the benefits and challenges associated with living in a diverse society. A set of model survey questions should be provided for student reference and teachers will teach students on the various ways of asking questions (open ended, closed ended, mixed question types).

After acquiring data from their fieldwork, students will perform do a basic coding of responses and present their findings in graphic forms – pie charts, bar graphs and line graphs. They may also choose to show meaningful quotes by individuals to enhance the quality of their findings. These findings can be presented on Google Slides to facilitate subsequent analysis of data for the class presentation.

Stage 4: Exercising Reasoning
At this stage, students will take a closer look at the data acquired from their survey findings. Students will extract relevant information required to help them answer the inquiry question. Using the basic questioning framework (Who, What, Where, When, Why, How), students will analyse the information acquired and make valid inferences about why diversity can, at times, become a challenge for society. They will also make inferences about the benefits of diversity for a society. At this point, students will also compare their survey findings with that of the secondary literature provided for them. They will try to identify similarities and reconcile the differing perspectives provided.

They will present their findings and conclusions in the Google Slide created in the previous stage and present their findings to the class. They will also learn to take questions from their peers and express their views confidently.

Stage 5: In their respective groups, students will be asked to reflect on both the
Reflective Thinking

process and knowledge acquired through the investigation project. For the former, students will think about some of the strengths of the group as well as areas where they felt they could do better. After listening to the differing views presented by different groups, students will also share with their group members on where they stand in this debate on whether diversity is necessarily beneficial for society.

Strengths and weaknesses

The strength of an inquiry-based approach towards concept learning is, as mentioned, the successful transfer of the responsibility of learning from the teacher to students. It can be observed that an investigative approach towards humanities education raises student commitment to the subject and encourages them to take ownership of their own learning. However, it must be mentioned that student commitment to the project is strongly dependent on their curiosity to learn and explore the inquiry. A general lack of interest in the subject matter of the inquiry could yield a less than optimal level of learning.

An important component of the inquiry-based approach is also the need for students to craft meaningful questions. This occurs at all stages of the inquiry process, prompting students to constantly ask questions and think about how they can go about finding answers to these questions. This ability to ask significant questions is most relevant to Stage Three of the inquiry project, where students are tasked to craft survey questions and are challenged to venture out of their comfort zone to survey the public for their opinions. This stage proved to be most challenging for most students, especially those who were not working in close consultation with their teachers to prepare their survey questions. Students from these groups realised that their interviewees did not comprehend their survey questions well and consequently could not answer them. This made them very unconfident with their own survey questions, leading to some groups turning in uncompleted survey forms eventually. On the other hand, students who had repeatedly consulted their teachers for feedback found more confidence in reaching out to the public because their revised survey questions were more targeted and were crafted with clarity. The disparity of experiences revealed the importance of guidance and the need for constant feedback in an inquiry investigation.

Furthermore, some practical concerns preventing classroom teachers from adopting these strategies include teachers’ concern for student acquisition of exam skills and knowledge, classroom management and even the tedious preparation process prior to the execution of an inquiry-based lesson. These are very real concerns. Yet, we need to recognise the potential in the use of inquiry for teaching and learning. While the classroom practitioner may not choose to adopt these approaches all the time, it is always useful to keep an open mind and be receptive to the use of such strategies – especially when the time and resources allow for it.

As mentioned above, the success of an inquiry-based learning activity is highly dependent on the ability of students to ask significant questions. However, this is one of the greatest challenges because many of our students are just so used to being told the answers that they lack both the self-
confidence and basic skills required to ask good questions. As a result, many survey questions crafted by the students were not targeted at the inquiry, leading to minimal acquisition of meaningful data for any further analysis. Students were also unable to sequence their questions in a coherent fashion, resulting in abrupt questions being asked. To this end, the integral role of the teacher as a facilitator should not be undermined throughout the inquiry process. As argued by Kirschner, Sweller and Clark (2010), minimally guided instruction in the execution of discovery learning can be detrimental to the learning process of students. While we recognise the potential inquiry has in “having learners construct their own solutions...[that] leads to the most effective learning experience”, Kirschner et al. (2010) argue that this process simply cannot be left to students and their own devices. In fact, educational researchers have discovered that “pure” discovery methods and minimal feedback often resulted in students becoming “lost and frustrated”, eventually causing confusion that can lead to grave misconceptions (Brown & Campione, 1994). The inquiry process, therefore, should not be one that seeks to lead to a total transfer of learning responsibilities to students. In fact, there is compelling evidence to show that strongly guided learning can and has been more effective in concept learning in comparison to discovery (Moreno, 2004). This is especially relevant to phases of the inquiry where student capacity falls short of.

Possible solutions

To build students’ commitment toward investigative inquiry, teachers should allow students to provide feedback on the inquiry question and even make adjustments to refine it accordingly. Some teachers may choose to even provide students with the autonomy to craft their own inquiry – although that would be highly dependent on the student profile at hand. A suggestion to spark curiosity would also be to start the inquiry on a strong start, with an engaging introduction and trigger activity that sparks off students’ curiosity and desire to investigate the subject matter at hand. This of course is highly reliant on the teacher’s understanding of the class profile. With their interest secured, students’ sense of commitment to learning is heightened and potential problems related to student disinterest and disengagement can be systematically minimised.

As for encouraging students to ask good questions, the classroom teacher will need to explicitly impart and model the various questioning techniques for students to learn from. The teacher will also need to spend time to allow for repeated consultations, so that feedback can be given for students to continuously refine their questions. To aid in this process, the classroom teacher might wish to adopt a “criteria for success” checklist so that self-assessment can be done prior to the teacher consultation session. This will make the entire process more efficient for both students and teachers. While we desire for our students to take ownership of their learning, one must remember that this does not imply the total discharge of learning responsibilities to them. As both research and our experiences in class has shown, scaffolding and continued guidance is of paramount importance in maximising students’ learning through inquiry-based learning strategies.

Conclusion

Indeed, the paradigm shift in Singapore’s Social Studies education is commendable and should be embraced by all educators. The greater emphasis on core content coupled with dynamic content,
would thus require teachers to develop their competency in building the conceptual understanding of their students. In this article, we have discussed two suitable approaches for teachers to adopt in teaching the concept of diversity: discussion-based and inquiry-based strategies. While both strategies differ in methodology, they converge in revealing the importance of dialogue and meaningful conversations in the teaching of the Social Studies subject in the 21st century classroom. Both learning methods provide opportunities for students to explore concepts in their own terms, tapping on not only their own lived experiences but also that of their peers. Ultimately, these strategies do not only allow our students an opportunity to deepen conceptual knowledge of the subject but also facilitates the acquisition of critical thinking skills. It is with these skills that our students can develop a more complex conceptual understanding of the subject, which allows them to better appreciate and apply what they learn in the classroom unto their social reality. Our role as educators would then be to empower our students to reconcile the abstract with the concrete on their own terms.

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