Structured Academic Controversy (SAC)

The Structured Academic Controversy protocol was developed by Roger T. Johnson and David W. Johnson, co-directors of the University of Minnesota’s Cooperative Learning Center (http://www.co-operation.org/). Successful participation in a SAC helps students move beyond either/or debates to craft a more nuanced synthesis of responses to important questions.

Classroom Procedures

Step 1 Preparation
   a. Partners prepare evidence to support their position.

Step 2 Presentation and Listening
   a. Pair A presents their position using supporting evidence.
   b. Pair B restates to Pair A’s satisfaction.
   c. Pair B presents their position using supporting evidence.
   d. Pair A restates to Pair B’s satisfaction.

Step 3 Consensus Building
   a. Abandon roles.
   b. Using supporting evidence, build consensus regarding the question—or at least identify where your differences lie.
   c. Consider the question: How should we judge people from the past?

Designing a SAC Lesson Plan

1. Choose a challenging question with two (or more) compelling answers.
2. Gather primary and/or secondary sources to be reviewed by the students in class.
3. Describe in writing how these sources can be used in support of one or both positions.
4. Prepare handouts that make the selected sources accessible to your students (consider length, vocabulary, and propriety).
5. Prepare a poster or handout that outlines the procedure for students to follow.
6. Be prepared to teach students to listen so that they avoid the common pitfall of rushing to debate or undermine the other position.
7. Encourage students to present their positions based on evidence by using multiple texts (sourcing and corroboration), citing evidence in the form of quotes, and being thorough.
8. Help students see that differences in positions often stem from differences in values, assumptions, and perspectives.