

Structured Academic Controversy (SAC)

Based on the work of Johnson and Johnson (1993)

The purpose of this method is to explore controversial topics effectively in a social studies classroom. The model ensures a “best case fair hearing” for the issue, followed by informed decision making and consensus building among students. It also demands engaged participation from every student in the room. By following a highly scaffolded process, participants will be able to advocate both for and against an issue/policy, determine the most relevant and convincing arguments, and search for consensus in small groups.

This is often an ideal method to introduce controversial issue discussions in a highly structured and non-threatening way, laying the foundation for large group and whole class discussions (like Socratic Seminars – which focus on powerful texts, Controversial Public Issue (CPI) Discussions – which ask students to work toward a public policy on an issue, and Town Meetings – which illuminate multiple perspectives on issues).

Note: this method works best in cases where there are two clear opposing viewpoints (as opposed to an issue with varying perspectives of equal merit)

Steps in a SAC:

1. All students are given a background reading or presentation on the issue to be discussed (could also be a documentary clip, audio recording, powerpoint, etc).
2. Place the students in **heterogeneous** groups of four.
3. Divide into pairs and assign one pair the position *in favor* of the position/policy and one pair *opposed to* the position/policy being discussed.
4. Give pairs a chance to read a handout or article containing arguments for their side. (You might also give students time to research the issue further to come up with arguments on their own.)
5. Pairs decide what their strongest arguments are and work on a presentation (with both presenting orally).
6. **Pairs present** their viewpoints (approximately 5 minutes) while the other pair takes notes and asks clarifying questions.
7. Pairs **reverse roles**, using their notes (those in favor are now opposed and those opposed must now argue in favor); this is a great way for students to see how effective they were in getting their points across to the others. If you want to extend the activity, you might give students a chance to separate meet again in pairs to do a little more research on their new positions and to incorporate their own content knowledge. Again, students decide who will say what.

8. Students present their new positions, and no clarifying questions are asked.
9. **A group discussion** follows, in which students abandon their assigned positions and now discuss what they found the most compelling arguments and credible evidence. The group attempts to achieve consensus on the issue.
10. **Students report out** on their group's decision.
11. Debrief the SAC, reflecting on how successfully the discussion taught them about the issue, gave them a deeper understanding of both viewpoints, and successfully led to informed decision making (and ideally consensus).

Steps in a Structured Academic Controversy (SAC)

Our goal in this discussion is to give both sides of a controversial issue a “best case” fair hearing, requiring you to understand the arguments of people on both sides. This process gives us a way to become informed decision makers after weighing the available evidence and logical reasoning of two opposing viewpoints.

Steps in a SAC:

1. Highlight the background reading on the issue to be discussed. Be sure to ask questions about concepts or vocabulary you don't understand.
2. Meet in an assigned group of four.
3. Divide into pairs and assume a perspective *in favor of* or *opposed to* the position/policy being discussed.
4. Read the materials containing arguments for your side.
5. Decide with your partner what your strongest arguments are, and work on a presentation (with both of you presenting orally).
6. Meet in the original group of 4, where **each side presents** their “best case” in support of their position (approximately 5 minutes) while the other pair takes notes and asks clarifying questions.
7. Pairs **reverse roles**, using notes taken in step 6 (those in favor are now opposed and those opposed must now argue in favor). Decide who will say what.
8. Present your new positions (this time no clarifying questions are asked).
9. **A group discussion** follows; now you can abandon your assigned position and discuss what you found most compelling and credible believable. Try to achieve consensus on the issue.
10. **Report out** on your group's decision.
11. We debrief on the SAC. How well did the discussion:
 - Teach you about the issue
 - Give you a deeper understanding of both viewpoints
 - Successfully led to informed decision making in your group
 - Achieve consensus