

“FRIDAY FORUM”

A “Friday Forum” is a series of class activities designed to engage students in controversial issues by helping them research those issues, form an opinion on them, and articulate that opinion in oral and written forms. It is essentially a trial-run on the Extended Response Questions use in the Social Studies MEAP and High School Proficiency Tests.

The rationale for the use of inquiry investigations and group discussions in Social Studies is carefully laid out in the booklet *Authentic Assessment of Social Studies*, published by the Michigan Department of Education. If students are going to become effective citizens, then they must practice good citizenship, that means they must have multiple opportunities to research a controversial issue, practice in a discussion of that issue, take a stand on it in a letter to the editor, and then, perhaps, act on that stand.

The public policy issue that we have chosen for the students to research and discuss is as follows:

Should Michigan’s concealed weapons law
be repealed?

If so, why? If not, why not?

This issue has been a hot topic for the past few years. It provokes much thought in light of the recent school shootings and violence that face many Americans. It raises fundamental questions with regard to Constitutional questions:

How does the Second Amendment affect
me as an individual?

Are my individual rights to life, liberty,
and the pursuit of happiness jeopardized
by this law?

By having nearly completed the Michigan Supreme Court unit, your students should have a strong background from which to approach these questions in the “Friday Forum”. In this unit, we have been helping students see that knowledge is socially constructed. Participating in a forum on a public policy issue is an excellent opportunity for students to experience this process directly. As they formulate and articulate their points of view and then see how their classmates react to their ideas, they will undoubtedly wonder why everyone can’t see the wisdom of their arguments. And, inevitably, they’ll wonder why Susie or Tommy stuck so vehemently to positions which may have seemed so much less convincing.

When it comes time to debrief the students on their forums, one of your challenges will be to help them reflect upon the positions that they took and why they might have differed from those that other students took. In those discussions the question may well surface: “Well, then, what is the correct answer, teacher?” If the unit has gone well, maybe it won’t.

“Friday Forums” are designed to be easily integrated into busy class schedules. They usually take about four or five class periods (plus some homework time) to complete.

Day One

Introduce the topic, explain the assignment, and hand out the journals. Show a relevant, thought provoking video and help the students take notes on it.

Day Two
and Three

Students are given more class time to build their understanding of the topic by reading articles and researching on the Web.

Day Four

The “Friday Forum” takes place.

Day Five

The teacher helps the students debrief on the Forum and begin writing letters to the editor on the Forum topic.

After the discussions, students are assigned to write a letter to the editor on the topic, meeting the requirements developed for the Social Studies MEAP test. After they are graded, the best and most interesting ones are presented to the students by reading them aloud or publishing them in a small newspaper created for this purpose.

After participating in three or four of these “Friday Forums”, students usually get good at them and look forward to having them. They stimulate a lot of clear thinking and teach students to ask good questions.