

Structured Academic Controversy Lesson Plan

Megan Zimpelman

Context

Overview (Title, Grade/Class, Length, Topic)

This is a Structured Academic Controversy Lesson Plan designed for a 60-minute general seventh-grade US History Part II class. In this a Structured Academic Controversy Lesson, students cooperatively learn about a specific, controversial historical issue through the examination and presentation of two different sides of the controversy. This type of lesson plan promotes a higher level of understanding surrounding the issue, and also works to develop important analytical and presentation skills in students. Specifically, students will learn about the controversy surrounding the formation of the League of Nations following World War I, and will be asked the question: *Should the United States join the League of Nations?*. Students will examine the arguments both for and against the United States joining the League of Nations. Students will recognize strong arguments on both sides of the debate, and will present these arguments to their classmates.

Background Information

This plan is designed to be a concluding lesson for students as they finish their unit on World War I. Students will have learned about the major players and events of WWI, and this lesson will serve as a way for students to examine how the war affected the U.S. home front and foreign policy.

Rationale

The mere suggestion of an intergovernmental organization aimed at maintaining peaceful international relations marked an historical shift in diplomatic policy, and ushered in a debate of whether the U.S. should enact a foreign policy of isolationism or intervention. It is important for students to understand the significance and the controversy surrounding the League, and how it laid the foundation for the international environment today.

Standards

This lesson aligns more with NCSS Standards than the standards provided by the state of Virginia. VA SOL USII.5c states that students must be able to explain the “international leadership role” of the United States at the end of the war, but there is no explicit mention of the League of Nations. However, the National Center for History in the Schools, which works with the NCSS to develop specific content standards, explicitly states that students should be able to evaluate the national debate over the League of Nations in their standards (US Era 7, Standard 2C).

Instructional Model

This is a Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) Lesson Plan, which allows for students to learn about a controversial issue through cooperative learning (Larson & Kieper, 219). The lesson plan is designed so that students discuss a specific topic in a structured, small group setting. In order for this type of lesson to be successful, the topic selected must have two well-documented positions, and be appropriate for the level of the students.

The issue of whether or not the United States should join the League of Nations is good match for this type of lesson. Following World War I, the question of whether or not the United States should join the League of Nations was a highly controversial, hotly debated issue. The arguments for and against joining are both easily accessible and incredibly relevant to understanding the history of the era, which makes the issue a good match for this type of lesson. By examining this topic in-depth, students will gain a better understanding of U.S. history and foreign policy in the 20th century.

Objectives

- Students will identify the purpose and controversial history of the League of Nations (knowledge).
- Students will read reasons for and against the United States' entry into the League of Nations using the provided worksheets (knowledge).
- Students will determine the most effective and convincing arguments regarding the controversy (skills).
- Students will present information for both sides of the controversy (skills).
- Students will take a position for or against the League of Nations and compose a structured, well-written paragraph explaining their view (skills and knowledge).

Assessment

Students will be assessed by their performance in class and by a writing assignment assigned at the end of class. Throughout the lesson, I will closely observe students' ability to discern strong arguments and then present these arguments to their classmates. Additionally, at the end of class, I will assign a short writing assignment where students must pick a side (that is, whether the United States should or should not join the League of Nations) and qualify this position using evidence presented and discussed in class. I assigned a similar assignment for the Concept Formation Lesson that I taught, and it worked well as a way for students to express what they learned in the lesson, and as a way to assess the effectiveness of my teaching. I will use the rubric at the end of this lesson plan to evaluate my students' responses and performance in class.

Content and Instructional Strategies

Perennial Issue

Should the United States adopt a foreign policy of intervention or isolation?

Case Issue

Should the United States join the League of Nations?

I. Hook / Background of Controversy (12 minutes)

Prior to the day of the lesson, I will need to rearrange the students' desks into groups of four, and devise a seating arrangement for students. When students enter the classroom, I will direct them to their assigned seat, and ask them to sit quietly until all students have arrived. Once all students have arrived, I will explain that the day's lesson will involve working and presenting in groups of four, but emphasize that I will be guide the class through the activities, and be available to answer questions and clarify assignments at all times.

I will then explain that the lesson will begin with a short video (<http://vimeo.com/20788335>). This video will provide students with brief background information on the League of Nations, and introduce them to the controversy of the League. After watching this video, I will again reiterate the U.S. was divided over whether or not to join the League, with President Woodrow Wilson staunchly supporting the League, and the majority of Congress opposing it. I will explain that although the United States eventually decided to not join the League of Nations, the issue was still incredibly controversial at the time.

Then, using a pre-made powerpoint presentation, I will read aloud two quotes representing each side of the debate, one from President Wilson and the other from Senator Henry Cabot Lodge:

“[The League of Nations] is a definite guaranty of peace. It is a definite guaranty by word against aggression. It is a definite guaranty against the things which have just come near bringing the whole structure of civilization into ruin.”

- President Woodrow Wilson

<http://www.examiner.com/article/text-woodrow-wilson-s-league-of-nations-speech>

“The United States is the world's best hope, but if you fetter her in the interest through quarrels of other nations, if you tangle her in the intrigues of Europe, you will destroy her powerful good, and endanger her very existence.”

- Senator Henry Cabot Lodge

[http://rs6.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/nfor:@band\(Lodge++Henry+Cabot\)#text](http://rs6.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/nfor:@band(Lodge++Henry+Cabot)#text)

I will then ask students to briefly reflect on these quotes as a class. I will ask students what side they think each figure supports, based on these quotes, and why. After this brief reflection, I will explain to students that they will now be given arguments for and against joining the League of Nations, and they will be asked to either support or oppose the League.

II. Round 1: Present Positions (14 minutes)

I will then assign the students sitting on the left side of the desk arrangements (two students for each group) the position of supporting the League of Nations. I will pass out pro-League worksheets to these students. I will then assign the students sitting on the right side of the desk arrangements (again, two students for each group) the position of opposing the League of Nations, and pass out the corresponding worksheets as well. I will then give the students a few minutes (about three or four, depending on the class) to read the documents. I will explain beforehand that the students must choose which argument from their worksheet they find most convincing, which they will then explain to the opposite side. I will explain that students should underline the argument they find most compelling, and write brief notes on the worksheet on why they chose this argument. I will ask them to talk with their fellow presenter about what argument they chose, so that they can avoid choosing the same argument.

After about four minutes, I will explain to the students that they will present the argument they find most convincing to the opposing side. Because this is the first time most of my students will engage in this type of activity, I will establish norms for this presentation, and list them on a powerpoint slide for students to refer back to. I will explain that students must speak in clear voices, look at the person they are presenting to, and be as thorough in their explanation as possible. I will explain that each side will be given two

minutes to explain their argument. After each side presents, however, I will explain that the other side has one minute to ask clarifying questions. I will explain that these questions are not a form of rebuttal, or a means to attack the argument, but rather an opportunity to ask questions to clarify the argument.

III. Round 2: Present Reverse Positions (14 minutes)

After each student has presented his or her argument, I will distribute additional copies of each of the data sets to each student. If a student previously received a pro-League worksheet, they will now receive an anti-League worksheet. I will then explain that the sides are now switched - so those students that were previously pro-League are now anti-League, and vice versa. I will explain to the students that they will repeat the same process, but now with the opposite point of view. That is, they each will read the worksheet and choose an argument, then present this argument, and then ask clarifying questions of the other side.

IV. Group Discussion / Consensus (10 minutes)

Once students have completed this second round of presentations, I will ask students to discuss in their small groups for five minutes about what they all could agree on about the issue – they no longer have to argue a specific position. The goal is for students to reach a level of consensus about the issue.

After about five minutes, I will have students discuss the issue as entire class. I will ask them to report to the class what their group discussed – *Did you reach a consensus? What did you agree on? What did you disagree on?* After students have discussed the issue for about five minutes, I will introduce the exit ticket/homework assignment.

In order for Sections II – IV (Position Presentations and Group Discussion / Consensus) of the lesson to run smoothly, I will write the timeline and expectations for the discussion on the whiteboard. By providing the students with specific time limits and outline for the class activity, I hope to keep the lesson running smoothly while preventing any down time that might lead to distraction.

V. Exit Ticket / Homework (10 minutes)

In order to conclude the class, and assess the students' learning, I will ask students to respond to following prompt:

Pretend you are a member of Congress in 1918. Would you support or oppose the United States joining the League of Nations? Why or why not? Using the arguments presented today, write a one-paragraph (4-5 sentences) response.

I will explain that students should write a one-paragraph response, using the arguments presented in class when writing their responses. The remainder of class time will be dedicated to this assignment, and I will explain that students who do not finish during class should complete the assignment at home.

Resources

- Background information on the League of Nations (video: <http://vimeo.com/20788335>)
- Pro and con data sets (one for each)
- PowerPoint presentation

Differentiation

Though this lesson is designed for general education 7th grade classes, it can be adapted both for higher-level learners or those who might need extra learning support. The information given on the data sets can be either lengthened or shortened, depending on the needs of the students. While the information is currently presented in short paragraphs in bullet form, the text can be rewritten into more detailed, longer paragraphs for higher-level learners, or condensed into shorter bullet points for those students on lower reading levels or who are learning English as a second language.

This lesson does involve verbal presentation, which might be intimidating for students who are typically more quiet or shy in the classroom. Since one of the main goals of this lesson is to get students comfortable with verbally presenting arguments, I do not want to excuse students from this part of the lesson. Rather, I will be sure to clearly explain the expectations for this part of the lesson, and establish norms so that students feel more comfortable during the presentation activity.

Adaptations

One of my cooperating teacher's classes is an inclusion class, and four students in this period receive pull-out instruction from a paraprofessional for certain class activities. I would consult with the paraprofessional about the best method for this lesson, but I could have these four students work together in one group, either in the classroom or as part of a pull-out session. A pull-out session would allow the students to work on reading the arguments together, and the paraprofessional could take an individualized approach to guiding the students through the presentation activity.

Reflection

Logistically speaking, the biggest issue with this lesson is the desk arrangement and seating assignments. Though it may seem simple enough to rearrange the desks into groups of four, I am sure my seventh-graders will be disoriented when they see their desk in a different place than it was yesterday. I will also have to be clear about where I want students to sit, as this new arrangement might cause additional confusion. In order to avoid any potential issues, I will determine a seating arrangement for each class ahead of time. For each class, I will make a seating chart that I will display on the lesson PowerPoint presentation, using the digital projector screen. When students enter the classroom, I will instruct them to find their name on the seating chart and sit in the corresponding seat. I do not think the seating rearrangement will be too big of an issue, however, I will just need to be very clear and structured in my explanation of the lesson. In order to soften the initial blow of confusion among students, I would also explain to students the day before the lesson that the desks will be rearranged because of a special activity. As long as I prepare students, and am clear about the lesson plan, I think students will enjoy and actively engage in a Structured Academic Controversy Lesson.

Overall, I think my seventh graders would enjoy this type of lesson, and the activities are well within their academic abilities. Though I think this lesson will definitely be challenging, and introduce them to a new way of thinking and learning, I believe this lesson will spark academic curiosity and develop important educational skills among students. This lesson corresponds well with several different PASS Standards, such as higher order thinking, deep knowledge, substantive conversation, and connections to the world beyond classroom (Standards 1-4). Additionally, there is an opportunity for students to develop a deeper

understanding of democracy and its values (Standard 5: Ethical Valuing) if there is time in the lesson to discuss how the U.S. Congress voted against joining the League of Nations, despite President Wilson's adamant support.

Data Set: Pro-League

The following points are arguments that **support** the United States joining the League of Nations.

- The League of Nations will prevent the outbreak of another global war by promoting peace through international discussion and cooperation. The governing body of the League of Nations will be made up of different countries from around the world, who will gather to discuss and solve international problems before they escalate to war.
- If an international dispute occurs, member countries of the League will meet to discuss what action to take. Under the League of Nations' Covenant, the League could take three different actions. It could call on the states in dispute to sit down and discuss the problem in an orderly and peaceful manner in the League's Assembly. The League's Assembly members would listen to both sides of the dispute, then decide together what action to take. If one country was seen as an aggressor, the League would issue a verbal warning to the aggressor state.
- If the states in dispute failed to listen to the Assembly's decision, the League could then introduce economic sanctions, such as cutting off trade with a specific nation. These sanctions would significantly harm a country's economy, and force them to follow the League's decision.
- The next step, if economic sanctions did not work, is the introduction of physical sanctions, in the form of military force that would be used to implement the League's decision. Together, these three actions would prevent the outbreak of another devastating global war.
- The creation of a League Assembly would foster discussion between multiple countries that would work to develop peaceful relations in the long run. By creating a forum for active discussion and conversation, the League would establish a norm of international peace.
- Finally, the League of Nations would hold countries accountable for their actions. If a country were to act aggressively, the League of Nations would take proper action against this country. Again, this would deter acts of violence and the outbreak of international war, and work to promote peace.

Which argument do you think is the strongest? Why?

Data Set: Anti-League

The following points are arguments **against** the United States joining the League of Nations.

- The League of Nations will entangle the United States in other countries' wars. The League of Nations charter requires all League members to defend other members from unprovoked attacks. This means that the U.S. would be drawn into a constant series of wars in all parts of the world, which would drain resources and result in high casualties.
- The League of Nations violates the explicit constitutional powers of the United States government. Under the League, the U.S. would be required to fight international wars, which would take away Congress' power to declare war, and instead give it to the League of Nations. The American people elected their representatives in Congress to make decisions regarding national security, and the League takes power away from the American people and government representatives.
- The League of Nations would also go against the Monroe Doctrine, a U.S. policy adopted in 1823 that opposed European interference in Western world affairs. The League would limit the right of the American people to govern themselves, and instead would impose legal and moral restraints of foreign powers that have no business in American affairs.
- If the U.S. joins the League, they will be forced to fight in international wars that will drain U.S. resources and harm the economy. These international wars would take resources away from the American people, and instead only focus on international affairs. Under Article I of the League charter, League members are required to provide aid and protection and American soldiers to other member states that should be used protecting the American people.
- Finally, the League does not have the means to be successful. Although the League Covenant states that physical action can be taken against aggressor nations, the League does not have an official military to carry out any physical action. Therefore, any aggressor nation could easily see through these empty threats, and defy the League's authority. Additionally, if the U.S. joins the League, they would be expected to provide military power to enforce these actions so they do not simply become empty threats. This would result in the deaths of many U.S. soldiers, and the depletion of military resources.

Which argument do you think is the strongest? Why?

Name: _____

Class Period: _____

Cool-Down Assignment

Pretend you are a member of Congress in 1918. Would you support or oppose the United States joining the League of Nations? Why or why not? Using the arguments presented today, write a one-paragraph (4-5 sentences) response.

SAC Lesson Plan Assessment Rubric

	Yes	“Sort of” - explain	No
Did the student choose one position (for or against the League)?			
Did the student include an explanation for their position, drawing from the arguments presented in class?			
Is the student’s writing structured in a paragraph form, with little to no mistakes?			
Did the student actively engage in presentation activity and class discussion?			