Debate in the classroom can take many forms, from simple to complex activities taking place in-class or online, and can be applied to a vast range of topics and disciplines, from sociology and history, to marketing, nursing, and biotechnology (Kennedy, 2007).

At its core, debate refers to “the systematic presentation of opposing arguments about a specific issue” (Roy & Macchiette, 2005, as cited in Alén et al., 2015). As participants listen, they must consider multiple viewpoints, evaluate the arguments through “active engagement and mastery of the content,” and arrive at a judgement (Freeley & Steinberg, 2005, as cited in Doody & Condon, 2012). A key point to keep in mind is that debate “should not be considered an end in itself, but rather as a method for rational and consensual problem solving” (Blanco, 2013, as cited in Alén et al., 2015).

Benefits of Debate

Research has identified numerous benefits associated with using debate in teaching. Debate has been referred to as a “holistic teaching method” because it not only increases students’ disciplinary knowledge, but has the potential to improve students’ critical thinking, problem-solving, and skill at argumentation, as well as their self-expression, oral and written communication, and presentation skills. Depending on how it is used, debate can also build student abilities in collaboration, discussion, and teamwork (Doody & Condon, 2012).

Debate has been shown to benefit student learning in the following ways:

- **Content expertise:** In order to succeed in a debate, students must read carefully, support their arguments with evidence, summarize points accurately, and actively engage in course content (Osborne, 2005; Doody & Condon, 2012). Debates therefore “have great potential for promoting competence and in-depth knowledge of substantive topics relevant to practice” (Doody & Condon, 2012).

- **Critical thinking:** In developing a position in a debate, students must go beyond rote learning and begin to think analytically and critically (Osborne, 2005). They must apply reason to identify fallacies and “clearly establish the elements that justify or weaken their own points of view” (Alén et al., 2015). Critical thinking skills used in debates include “defining the problem, assessing the credibility of sources, identifying and challenging assumptions, recognising inconsistencies, and prioritizing the relevance and salience of various points within the overall argument” (Kennedy, 2007).

- **Communication:** Debate has been shown to improve oral communication skills as students “must think about not only what will be said but also how it will be said” (Roy & Macchiette, 2005 as cited in Alén et al., 2015). Students must also “hone their listening skills in order to give effective rebuttals.” In the words of one student: “Debate changed my life because it taught me to listen” (Snider & Schnurr, 2002, as cited in Kennedy, 2007). In addition to improving communication skills, when learning is done together through debate and discussion, students are able to retain information for longer (Doody & Condon, 2012) and cognitive development is stimulated (Tumposky, 2004, as cited in Alén et al., 2015).

- **Professional practice:** Debates can bring the real world into the classroom, leading to an “increased awareness of important issues in the field” (Omelicheva and Avdeyeva, 2008 as cited in Doody &
By forcing students to examine multiple sides of an issue and to see how opposing theories can exist within a field, debate can give students an appreciation of “the complexities involved in practice” (Doody & Condon, 2012). Debates also help build the soft skills that are valued by employers, including how to write effectively and work in teams (Doody & Condon, 2012).

- **Empowering students:** Debates require students to take responsibility for their own learning and to teach each other (Firmin et al., 2007; Walker and Warhurst, 2000, as cited in Doody & Condon, 2012). A student that has participated in a successful debate experience can become more open-minded, transcend their own biases, and demonstrate empathy (Kennedy, 2007). As they develop their own debating style, student confidence can increase (Peelo, 1994, as cited in Doody & Condon, 2012).

- **Positive learning experience:** Students generally report enjoying debates as a classroom activity because they make the course content personal (Lantis, 2004, as cited in Doody & Condon, 2012), are socially stimulating (Dundes, 2001, as cited in Doody & Condon, 2012), and because “they add an element of competition to assessments, whilst still allowing for multiple opinions to be heard and accepted” (Goodwin, 2003, as cited in Doody & Condon, 2012). Depending on the way they are designed, debates can provide multiple forms of assessments of both writing and oral performance, which “gives more students an opportunity to excel” (Kennedy, 2007).

### Drawbacks to Debate

When integrating debate into the classroom, there are some potential drawbacks to keep in mind. These drawbacks can often be addressed through the careful design of the debate activity.

- **Debate can promote dualistic thinking:** Debates are often structured with students viewing an issue from two opposing perspectives, rather than allowing for problems that have “multiple viable solutions or only one defensible point of view” (Kennedy, 2007).

- **Debate can create an adversarial classroom:** Because debate can create a competitive environment centered around open disagreement, students can associate the activity with “negative interpersonal or emotional qualities such as hostility or fighting” (Goodwin, 2003 as cited in Alén et al., 2015). A confrontational environment can make conflict-averse students uncomfortable or unwilling to participate (Kennedy, 2007).

- **Debate can reinforce existing beliefs:** Some critics of debate as a teaching method believe that “participation in a debate merely reinforces a student’s existing beliefs rather than promoting an objective analysis of an issue” (Kennedy, 2007) or that students will not be able to adjust their thinking to process clashing opinions (Alén et al., 2015).

### Method

There are numerous ways of designing a debate activity depending on class size, student dynamics, course content, and intended learning outcomes (Alén et al., 2015).

### Preparing Students for Debate

To ensure a successful debate experience, instructors should consider the following steps:

- **Provide students with clear instructions,** expectations, and evaluation criteria.
- **Motivate students** by communicating how the debate activity will help them both in the course and in building the skills they will need to succeed in professional environments (Oros, 2007).
• **Build confidence by giving students the opportunities to practice**, and scaffold the development of debate skills by having students “participate in a nongraded ‘practice debate’ and to receive constructive feedback on the initial performance” (Oros, 2007).

• **Consider the sources from which students should pull their evidence.** Will students be using course readings or will they be required to do additional research? If so, how will the research process be supported? (Oros, 2007). For example, Osborne creates a packet of primary and secondary sources for use in each debate. Students are also required to submit related current events articles and links to a discussion thread in the course management system, commenting on their submissions and the submissions of others (2005).

### Selecting a Topic for Debate

A traditional debate proposal or resolution is a topic that is adequate for debate, presented in a concise and neutral manner (Alén et al., 2015; Audette, 2015). Topics should be relevant to students and to the course, have answers that “can be argued strongly from two (or more) sides” (Oros, 2007), and are “simple enough to debate, yet complex enough to build multiple arguments” (Audette, 2015).

Huber identified characteristics of an effective debate proposal as being “interesting for the debaters, current, opportune, capable of being addressed in the available time, adequate for oral presentation, provocative, clear, capable of being supported by evidence, worth debating, capable of being compared, and limited to a single issue” (1964, as cited in Alén et al., 2015).

Audette (2015) has identified three types of topics that can be suitable for debate:

- **Disputed Fact:** “Violent media increases violence in society”
- **Value:** “Competitive sports are beneficial to children”
- **Policy:** “The government should legalize narcotics”

Oros suggests adding “an additional level of active learning” and involving students “in the crafting of some of the debate questions” (2007).

### Structuring the Debate

Debate is an incredibly flexible teaching strategy and can be adjusted to the class size, the level of involvement from students, the work involved on the part of the instructor, or the amount of course time available.

A traditional debate format (Kennedy, 2007; SALTISE, 2019) might be structured like this:

- Students prepare a written assignment summarizing both positions on a debate question to be submitted the night before the debate takes place. Alternatively, students can be divided into groups to do the preparatory work in class.
- In class, the instructor provides students with guidelines and/or procedures for their roles on either the debate team or as the audience (peer assessors).
- Students are assigned their role in the debate and their position on the issue. Waiting until the last minute to assign a position to a student forces students to consider both sides of the issue rather than reinforcing their existing position.
A typical debate sequence consists of:
  - Introduction of arguments
  - Rebuttals
  - Concluding remarks
  - Questions from the audience
  - Peer assessment via a rubric or other form

During the debate, the instructor serves as facilitator, managing the experience for students, keeping them on task, and monitoring the time. After the debate, the instructor’s role becomes that of synthesizer, achieving “a balance in post-debate discussion between constructive criticism of points raised by debaters and broader lessons that should be conveyed to and discussed among the class as a whole” (Oros, 2007).

As an alternative to preparing a written assignment before the debate, students submit a written reflection post-debate summarizing the arguments that were made and defending their position.

Some other ways to structure a debate include:

- **Four Corners**: This activity can be done quickly during a lecture to break up the class and get students moving and discussing the course content. Students are asked to consider a statement and then move to a corner of the room representing a position, for example “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” In their corners, the students can put together an argument in support of their positions. After each corner has a chance to defend its position, the students can move to a new corner if their opinion has shifted. Each group then “writes a paragraph summarizing the four strongest arguments for their position” (Hopkins, 2003a as cited in Kennedy, 2007).

- **Think-Pair-Share-Square**: There are many variations on this activity, which is a low-stakes way of introducing students to debate and providing them with opportunities to practice the skills needed to succeed. One method asks students to consider an issue individually and make some notes. The students then work in pairs to craft an argument in support of both sides of an issue. Next, “two pairs work together to come to a consensus on which side they wish to support and refine their list of reasons for that side.” The groups of four are then asked to share their conclusions and supporting arguments with the whole class (Kennedy, 2007).

- **Role-Play**: Rather than having two teams arguing for or against a resolution, a role-play debate assigns students or groups of students a role as a stakeholder in a particular issue. For example, in a debate about separated bike lanes, students could play the roles of cycling advocate, city planner, local business owner, government official, property developer, and a member of a homeowner’s association. This is an effective way to “promote more than two viewpoints on an issue” (Hopkins, 2003b as cited in Kennedy, 2007).

- **Meeting-House Debate**: This method is similar to a typical debate scenario, with teams making arguments for or against a particular resolution, however it works to get the rest of the class involved asking questions or giving comments for response. The instructor serves as moderator, ensuring that each side receives the same number of questions. To help guarantee equal participation, each student can be given three cards or tokens. Each time they speak, they must submit a token. Once they have used up all their cards they can’t speak again until all students have fully participated (Kennedy, 2007).

- **Problem-Solving Debate**: In teams of four, students debate a particular issue or question. The first speaker on each team is tasked with describing the historical and philosophical background to the issue, the second speaker argues for why changes are or are not justified, the third speaker presents a plan of action, and the fourth speaker summarizes the team’s position (Kennedy, 2007).
• **Antagonist / Questioner / Conciliator:** In this format, students take turns playing the roles of antagonists, arguing for or against a position, questioners, who come to the debate prepared with a question for the antagonists, and conciliators, who “propose a compromise or alternative solution two-thirds of the way through the debate” (Musselman, 2004 as cited in Kennedy, 2007). This can help reduce the tendency toward dualistic thinking that can be encouraged by debate.

• **First Responders:** To help guide a post-debate discussion, guarantee participation, and reduce anxiety at being called on to speak, students can be designated in advance as “first responders,” asking them to “consider specific questions raised during the debate, such as: ‘Which of the lines of arguments raised by the debaters did you find most convincing?’” (Oros, 2007).

### Assessment

The kind of assessment used to evaluate a debate activity will depend on the form the activity has taken and the intended learning outcomes. Some instructors “give students full credit for participation alone, and others grade on a pass/fail basis to decrease the anxiety associated with an unfamiliar activity” (Garrett, Schoener, & Hood, 1996, as cited in Kennedy, 2007), others “collect the students’ notes, which account for 50% of their grade, so that those who struggle in oral communication skills can still obtain a good grade” (Huryn, 1986 as cited in Kennedy, 2007).

Instructors also have to decide whether students will be assessed as a group or as individuals. Oros stresses the importance of students receiving both a group and individual grade for participating in a structured debate exercise. By providing a debate team with a group grade and team-focused feedback, Oros aims to develop speaking, research, and group-management skills. By providing an individual grade on a written assignment that follows the debate, they hope to “codify critical thinking skills developed in oral debates, reward individual effort, and mitigate free-rider problems” (2007).

### Selecting Assessment Criteria

A rubric is an effective way of assessing debate performance and can be used both by the instructor to generate a grade or to gather peer feedback from students on the performance of their team or their opinion of the debate they’ve watched. Rubrics can be divided into categories such as preparation, analysis, evidence, organization, delivery, argumentation, and teamwork (Kennedy, 2007; Doody & Condon, 2012).

The following criteria can be used to create a rubric to assess student performance in debate either individually or as a team (Oros, 2007; Kennedy, 2007):

- Was the presentation persuasive?
- Was the presentation well organized?
- Did the presenter provide clear, coherent arguments?
- Did the presentation focus on the central ideas of the debate?
- Did the presenters meet the burden of proof, based on course materials and/or outside research?
- Is every statement supported by cited researched evidence?
- Is the research complete or are their gaps?
- Are an adequate number of sources used?
- Is the evidence biased in some way?
- Was the presentation delivery dynamic and effective?
- Did the presenter make eye contact with the audience?
• Did the presenter respond to all of the opponent’s points?
• Did the presenter challenge flaws or inconsistencies in the opposition’s arguments?
• Did the presenter avoid making faulty generalizations, distorting information, and oversimplifying issues?
• Were the arguments and counterarguments presented logically consistent?
• Was the presenter able to confront opposing arguments and rebuild their own case?

Work Cited


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